

## Empathy: A Teachable Skill

As I continue to explore, discover, and share lessons in interpersonal communication, my belief in empathy as one of the most important skills for a fulfilling and successful veterinary career remains unshaken. The rewarding impact of sincere expressions of empathy on interpersonal connections is often immediate and powerful yet, there is little focus on empathy as a teachable skill. This shortfall prompted me to trial a formal empathy education training program with the leading expert Dr. Helen Riess, a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, Director of the Empathy and Relationship Science program at Massachusetts General Hospital, author of “The Empathy Effect”, and the founder of Empathetics, Inc. ([www.empathetics.com](http://www.empathetics.com)) which has its roots in the neuroscience of emotions and emotional intelligence. I had the pleasure of experiencing this inaugural veterinary specific workshop with a dozen colleagues including veterinary practitioners, RVT’s, practice managers, practice owners and leading academic communications experts.

So, what did I discover? Bottom line: Although we are innately wired to connect with and react to the emotions of others, empathy is like all other clinical veterinary skills and requires ongoing training if we are to provide the highest level of empathic communication with our clients and colleagues while keeping ourselves whole and healthy in the process. The purpose of this article is to present some of my ‘go-to’ empathy prompts and to share empathy education resources.

At its core, empathy is about making people feel heard – truly heard - not just hearing their presenting complaint but hearing and understanding the concerns about the impact of that complaint on their world. Dr. Riess refers to this as “hearing the whole person” to understand the client’s perspective. We are experiencing the world through the eyes of others. During this present time of crisis and uncertainty, clients and colleagues alike need their specific emotions and situations to be heard and understood without judgment, more than ever.

Be human first! Because we commonly feel most comfortable in the “find it and fix it” mindset, we tend to launch into finding the medical solutions before taking the time to understand the client’s perspective and share our understanding with them (empathy). Evidence-based research in human and veterinary medicine shows that empathy plays a significant role in enhanced levels of trust, more effective consultations, improved medical outcomes and greater satisfaction for everyone involved. Practiced use of empathy can contribute to better medical care for your patient and more gratifying personal interactions.

Empathy begins with a healthy dose of curiosity. For example, instead of becoming defensive, be curious. If you are experiencing a strong, uncomfortable emotional response during a conversation, it can be a direct reflection of what the other person is feeling. Instead of shifting the focus to your own level of distress, get curious about what is behind the distress of the other person. Use open-ended questions to hear and understand the story behind the person’s behaviour.

Effective empathy with others begins with self-awareness. Recognizing your own vulnerabilities, your immediate emotional response to a situation or your typical response to stress allows you to control the mindset that you will adopt during your conversation. By reflecting on what triggers your emotional response, you can learn to check impulsive actions or words. By naming the emotion you are experiencing, you are better able to remain calm, identify a specific management approach and to prepare thoughtful next steps for a meaningful conversation.

Having empathy does not mean meeting all the pet owner's demands. You can be understanding of the pet owner's concerns and demands however, your priority is to provide the best medical care for the pet within the limits of your practice and professional responsibilities. Emphasize that you share a common concern to do what is best for the pet, explain necessary boundaries along with the rationale, and continue to express your understanding of the difficulty of the situation for the pet owner.

Excellence in veterinary medicine also means having empathy for our patients. Understanding how and why an animal reacts in a particular manner should shape how we treat and care for them. Feline friendly approaches, trust based equine training, and 'cow comfort' housing systems are examples of empathic considerations in veterinary medicine.

You can only help others when you have found tools that help to keep yourself healthy. An essential component of empathy is to have personal strategies that allow you to be sensitive to others while maintaining a healthy emotional distance - strategies that allow you to temporarily take on another person's experience and enable you to move your focus forward to how improvements in the situation can be made (eg. providing comfort, relieving pain, envisioning a future where suffering is diminished). The following resources present the neuroscience of emotions as well as provide the fundamental skills, frameworks and tools for empathy, emotional intelligence and self-compassion that will support healthy empathic communication. Enjoy your empathy education journey!

1. Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It can Matter More Than IQ*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010.
2. Holowaychuk, Marie. [www.marieholowaychuk.com](http://www.marieholowaychuk.com). An informative website that empowers veterinarians, technicians, and other veterinary professionals to use practical tools and tips for living a healthy and balanced life.
3. Riess, Helen. TedX talk: The Power of Empathy.
4. Riess, Helen. *The Empathy Effect*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2018.

Jayne Takahashi DVM, MBA  
Communication Leads  
November 2020