

Voices from the Field: Ann Turnbull



The Importance of Empathy

I vividly remember a phone conversation I had with a nurse in 1991. First the context-- My son, Jay, who experienced an ID, autism, and a bi-polar disorder was in a crisis phase. He was 22 and had recently been expelled from the only adult service system in our community. He was expressing his angst through aggressive behavior toward himself and others. He would bang his head on the wall, pull his hair, and make loud, groaning noises. He would also vigorously pull the hair of his paid caregivers and family. It was tough.

Back to the phone call. I was calling to make an appointment with a neurologist known to excel in psychotropic medication for individuals with significant disabilities. I vividly remember the nurse telling me in a matter-of-fact way that the doctor could not see Jay for over two months. She was very straight forward and impersonal. Her words sounded empty to me. I was doubtful we could survive for 2 months. I remember still today—a quarter of a century later—that I longed, really deeply longed, for something more.

I wasn't expecting her to fix the problem for us--to break someone else's appointment to get us in or to have a magic wand for Jay. I was longing to not feel that I and my family were not utterly alone. I was longing for empathetic communication.

Empathy is understanding feelings, thoughts, and actions of another by taking his or her perspective. Taking another person's perspective enables you to develop a deep understanding of the other person's vantage point as contrasted to making interpretations solely according to your own vantage point. Thus, a key element of empathy is that there is no judgment or criticism of the other person.

In order for families to feel heard, your own understanding and respect for their perspectives—your inside empathy—is a necessary component; however, inside empathy is not sufficient. You must also be able to communicate your understanding and respect to families; thus, you must incorporate outside empathy into your ongoing interactions with families. Your best work as a professional occurs when you combine your inside and outside empathy to hone your skills of empathetic communication.

Empathetic communication incorporates the basic fundamentals of empathy (e.g., understanding the feelings, thoughts, and actions of another; taking the other person's perspective) and the basic fundamentals of communication (e.g., speaking clearly, making eye contact, leaning forward, smiling, and nodding), but involves an additional dimension. Empathetic communication also involves tuning in to the feelings, thoughts, and actions of another person by taking his or her perspective and then communicating that you respectfully understand and care. Some steps you can take to engage in empathetic communication include:

- Listening with your heart as well as your ears and eyes,
- Seeking to step out of your shoes and into the shoes of others who are facing challenges and feel what it's like,
- Bringing feelings into the open—noticing, naming, responding, validating
- Communicating that you understand and care.

This is what I needed for the nurse to say—

I hear in your voice that you are feeling desperate for help. If I were in your shoes, I would feel the same way. I so wish we could get Jay in earlier. I am happy to put your name on our call list, if we have a cancellation. Right now, though, I want you to know that I care about what you all are going through and trust that better days are ahead.

If that had happened, I likely would have still remembered it a quarter of a century later, but this time I would have remembered it for its restorative boost in my journey to support Jay, my family, and myself in experiencing quality of life.