

## ***E* for Empathy**

### **The Role of Empathy**

Empathy is not a magical healing power. Nor it is a “state” of experience that leaves people feeling warm and fuzzy, and thus somehow better off. Rather, it is an interpersonal process of being open to another person’s world, of trying to understand that person’s inner world, of trying to communicate your understanding (not your approval or disapproval, but your understanding) of that person’s inner world, and of being open to clarification and correction by the other person.<sup>1,2</sup>

### **Empathy for Families and Friends**

Families and friends of a person suffering from an eating disorder have, for years, told us the following. Even though many of them “have heard about” and “know about” eating disorders, the emotional impact and the behavioral disruptions created by the eating disorder and the person’s defensiveness leave family and friends feeling isolated and helpless. Moreover, as time goes on, and the tensions and problems build, almost everyone involved has, at some point, felt or done or said things that leave them wondering about their own sanity and their own worth as a person.<sup>3,4</sup>

We work with eating disorders, we are parents and aunts and uncles, and some of us have suffered from eating disorders or other mental disorders such as depression. So, we know that—and we want you to know that we know that:

- **You are not crazy**, even though at time you may have thoughts, and feelings, and impulses that feel unusual and out of control, and even frightening.
- **You are not alone**. Other families and friends have “been where you’re at now” in many respects.
- **You are—and you feel—confused and helpless at times**. This is because you are human, you care about your loved one, and you have tried many things to help, including doing everything for them and doing nothing.

**Remember: Feeling powerless at times is painful, depressing, and, above all, normal. But feeling powerless does not mean you are, indeed, powerless to take constructive, loving steps to help your family member**

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- <sup>1</sup> Rogers, C. (1980). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- <sup>2</sup> Rogers, C., Dorfman, E., & Gord, T. (1951). *Client-centered therapy: Its current practice, implications, and theory*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- <sup>3</sup> Herrin, M., & Matsumoto, N. (2007). *The parent's guide to eating disorders: Supporting self-esteem, healthy eating, & positive body image at home* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Carlsbad, CA: Gürze.
- <sup>4</sup> Treasure, J. (1997). *Anorexia nervosa: A survival guide for families, friends and sufferers*. East Sussex, UK: Psychology Press.

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