

Empathy & Respect

Empathy has a number of definitions, but it can be simplistically described as **the ability to appreciate, and respond to, the feelings of others.**

Common metaphors for empathy (literally 'feeling into' or 'suffering with') are 'walking in another's shoes', or perhaps more accurately 'seeing through another's eyes'. Empathy is distinct from the related emotional reactions of *sympathy* ('feeling for') and *compassion* ('noticing suffering in another coupled with a wish to alleviate it').

Empathy involves both emotional and cognitive processes and is considered a key part of **emotional intelligence (EI)**. EI describes the capacity to recognise the emotions of self and others and respond accordingly, such as tailoring behaviour and communication style. Mercer & Reynolds¹ describe empathy as:

"the ability to identify an individual's unique situation (perspective, opinions, ideas, and feelings); to communicate that understanding back to the individual and to act on that understanding in a helpful way"

Communicating genuine empathy allows the other person to feel respected, accepted and understood. Empathy is key to establishing both **trust** and **respect**, which can be defined as showing due regard for the feelings, needs, or rights of others. Respectful communication validates the basic dignity and worth of others, without necessarily endorsing their views or beliefs.

What they said

"I think that, although professionalism is important, it should not override empathy for animal or owner."
(Client)

"I think it might have been a dog that was pregnant — an unexpected pregnancy, or something like that. And the owner was obviously, you know, 'Oh, we've been meaning to get her de-sexed, but obviously we didn't and now this happened'. [The vet made] a rather flippant comment like, 'Well this should have never happened in the first place' ... well, you know, that doesn't help anyone." (Employer)

"It's much more important to me that the vet has a relationship with my pet and has empathy and respect towards her."
(Client)

How are empathy and respect recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You actively listen to others' feelings, perspectives and concerns
- You find it easy to read other people's emotions
- You respond to emotional cues, including acknowledging animal wellbeing and the human-animal bond
- You can respond to others' emotions helpfully, without feeling burdened by them yourself
- You maintain respectful relationships, even when you disagree with people

Perceived by others:

- High emotional intelligence
- A 'people person'
- Gentle, caring, compassionate
- A good listener
- Approachable, with open body language
- Takes a genuine interest in clients and their animals
- Non-judgmental and respectful of diversity

The VetSet2Go project found that many clients highly value empathy and respect, often more so than a detached, 'professional' attitude. These traits were valued both in relation to specific situations (such as when euthanizing a patient) but also more generally, especially around listening to clients and respecting their opinions, circumstances and feelings when making decisions about their animal's care. Some clients placed **empathy and respect for their animal** above empathy and respect for themselves.

Why are empathy and respect important to employability?

Empathy is a **powerful social skill** that fosters understanding and relationships. In veterinary teams, empathy and mutual respect for all members of the healthcare team creates a **positive working environment** and supports **teamwork and collaboration**. Empathy and respect establishes trust with a client, and thus promotes client adherence to agreed management plans and effective clinical outcomes, whilst also mitigating conflict and difficult conversations.

Evidence suggests that clients choose a veterinary practice based on how staff treat them and their animals, as much as on clinical excellence. Showing empathy to clients leads to higher client satisfaction² and both empathy and respect for clients' wishes are seen as especially important when discussing financial considerations and end-of-life care. Empathy and respect are therefore important factors in employability and key to **effective communication** and **relationship-centered care**, as well as demonstrating **trustworthiness** and professionalism.

Empathy is also closely linked to the wellbeing of the veterinarian themselves, since those who expressed more empathy tended to be more satisfied in their jobs³. As such, compassion for yourself, as well as empathy for others, is a key factor in building **emotional competence** and **resilience**.

"I think vets should also treat their staff with respect and courtesy. I think it reflects badly if they are disrespectful of their staff, especially in front of a client." (Client)

"I had [an employee] grab a dog around the chest and then just drag it out of the consult room. And the owners were watching. But she was completely oblivious to why that was even of any concern ... I guess, all I ever say to them is, 'I put myself in the animal's place. How would you feel if this was happening to you?'" (Employer)

"I think empathy and reassurance are very important in cases with difficult health problems that are worrying to the client. This empathy and care goes a long way and really helps to make us feel better." (Client)

Possible strategies to enhance your empathy and respect

Practise active listening:

Ask about, and take into account, the concerns, needs and views of clients. Try to mindfully focus on their response, rather than your own thoughts.

Look out for emotional cues:

Body language, eye contact and the ways in which clients bring up concerns can all hint at how they are feeling and allow you to respond accordingly.

Pay attention to your wellbeing:

Looking after your own wellbeing can help you to maintain your empathy with clients, patients and colleagues.

Build your emotional intelligence:

Particularly through **self-awareness** of how other people perceive

you, and how you respond to others' emotions.

Watch your tone of voice and body language:

Be mindful of how your tone of voice or body language affect the perceptions of the client and patient. Try to use a warm, accepting tone of voice, open body language and maintain eye contact.

Don't rush:

Taking the time to express empathy, to stop and listen, and to be people-focused can, surprisingly, often be more efficient than narrowly focusing on the clinical task.

Use appropriate language:

Practise using empathic statements to offer reflection or legitimisation of the client's feelings; this promotes support of, partnership with, and respect for clients.

Further Resources:

- Adams, C.L. & Frankel, R.M. (2007) It may be a dog's life but the relationship with her owners is also key to her health and wellbeing: communication in veterinary medicine. *The Veterinary Clinics of North America. Small Animal Practice* 37(1):1-17
- Goleman, D. (1995) *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing

References:

1. Mercer, S.W. & Reynolds, W.J. (2002) Empathy and quality of care. *British Journal of General Practice* 52: S9-13
2. McArthur, M.L. & Fitzgerald, J.R. (2013) Companion animal veterinarians' use of clinical communication skills. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 91:374-380
3. Shaw, J.R. et al. (2012) Veterinarian satisfaction with companion animal visits. *Journal of the American Vet. Medical Assoc.* 240: 832-841