



FEBRUARY 5, 2020

Hi all!

I hope everyone is safe, healthy and settling into the new year. As I sat down to write this letter, the topic of empathy kept floating to the top of my mind. As veterinarians and veterinary professionals, I think many of us are highly empathetic. Empathy allows us to be deeply caring for both our patients and clients, understanding what they might be experiencing emotionally. It seems intuitive that having empathy would make us better doctors, technicians, assistants, PMs and CSRs. And indeed, empathy can improve the ability of healthcare teams to find meaning in our work and lead to lower burnout when managed appropriately. However, it can also begin to take its toll on us, when we take on clients' emotions regularly. Without learning to recognize those emotions as the clients' and not our own and without learning to set boundaries, we can become stressed, overwhelmed and ultimately suffer burnout and/or [compassion fatigue](#).

Because of its importance in our field, a few months ago, I took a training course by Dr. Helen Reiss of <https://empathetics.com/>. We spent three days diving deep into empathy. We explored the neuroscience of empathy and practical applications for interacting with difficult clients, delivering bad news and more. One of the first things we talked about was the concept of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are neurons found in the frontal and parietal cortex of our brains that enable us to reflect body language, facial expressions, and emotions. They allow us to empathize. Mirroring is a huge part of nonverbal communication and these neurons allow us to mirror and respond to someone else's emotions. This is something we often do naturally when hearing a story or having a conversation, but we can also do it intentionally when we're interacting with clients, letting them know we understand their emotions and care. Think about eye contact, posture, facial expressions, and tone of voice. These are all parts of nonverbal communication we can use to connect with clients in a more meaningful and caring way. In the case of delivering unwelcome news, it has been shown repeatedly that clients will remember how the bad news was delivered more than the actual content of the conversation. Overuse of technical language, combining bad news with too much detailed prognostic information, rushing the conversation, not using caring language such as "I'm sorry I have to tell you", and forgetting to check in after delivering the news are common pitfalls for delivering bad news.

Consider using these open-ended “check-in” questions with clients:

What questions do you have?

Does this make sense?

What are your concerns?

In closing, tapping into empathy will pay off in almost all our interpersonal interactions. It’s a crucial way that we connect! We’ll dive deeper into boundary setting in our next installment, using this to protect our empathy and well-being.

Here are a few resources:

Dr. Riess Ted Talk on empathy (scroll down the page to the link):

<https://empathetics.com/the-empathy-effect/>

Daniel Goleman, the author of Emotional Intelligence, Ted Talk:

https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_goleman_why_aren_t_we_more_compassionate/up-next?language=en

And this sweet short by Brene Brown about the difference between empathy and sympathy:

<https://brenebrown.com/videos/rsa-short-empathy/>

Again, please let me know if there are topics you would enjoy hearing about or topics that would be especially helpful. May our connection as a community foster resilience.

**Be well,
Ginny**

