

## Phases of Empathy: A Movie Review

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### Abstract

*The current paper makes use of a commercially successful movie “Dear Zindagi” to introduce the concept of empathetic skilfulness. The movie is about Kaira (Alia Bhatt), cinematographer by profession, who is going through a tumultuous period of life. For this she approaches Dr. Jahangir Khan/Jug (Shahrukh Khan) who is a Psychologist/Counsellor/therapist by profession. Empathy is recognized by professionals as a key ingredient of every counselling therapy. This paper is an attempt to emphasize upon the continuous use of empathy in therapy using various techniques discussed using practical examples taken from the movie itself. Empathetic skilfulness is conceptualized as running through five phases (Client expression, clinician reception, clinician understanding, clinician expression and client reception) wherein each phase has been discussed using techniques, examples and analogies.*

**Keywords:** *client, counselling, counsellor, empathy, skill.*

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### Introduction

Empathy is referred to as the experience of understanding of another person's condition from their perspective rather than one's own belief systems or perspectives. It has been often described as looking at a situation by putting oneself in another person's shoes. Empathy as a skill is difficult to achieve but is vital for every therapeutic encounter. Empathy recognizes, welcomes and treasures the individuality, personhood, identity, spirit or soul of the other human being in all its shared and unique aspects. Empathic therapies offer a caring, understanding and empowering attitude toward the individual's emotional struggles, aspirations and personal growth (Breggin, 2010).

Across very diverse treatments and therapeutic approaches including psychoanalysis, person centered, behavioural or cognitive, empathy is considered to be essential because for any intervention or strategy to work, the therapist must make the person in treatment

feel understood. In psychoanalysis, empathy forms the only medium to cross the boundaries and enter the inner world of the client; in person centered therapy empathy is essential to fulfil the core condition of treating the client with unconditional positive regard while it helps in collaborative interactions during cognitive therapies. Empathic attunement, Empathic attitude and Empathic communication form the essence of various therapies.

The paper explains the concept of empathy, empathic therapy, empathic skilfulness and its phases using movie “Dear Zindagi”. It is a mainstream hindi movie directed and written by Gauri Shinde featuring Shahrukh Khan as Dr. Jahangir Khan/Jug who is a therapist and Alia Bhatt as Kaira who is a cinematographer and is going through a tumultuous period of life. Dear Zindagi becomes highly interesting when Kaira meets Jahangir Khan. His unconventional ways of therapy and his initial conversations with Kaira are seen as both delightful as well as insightful.

The movie attempts to conduct a mental health dialogue with the audience generating knowledge in them about psychotherapy, counselling and its importance. It subtly yet powerfully deals with the concept of empathetic skilfulness and various phases associated with it as utilised by counsellors in the form of a skill.

Alia Bhatt aka Kaira plays the protagonist in the course of movie and is portrayed as a young lady who is restless and is in a constant search for something, has relationship issues and problems with parents. She also looks forward to a break in her career.

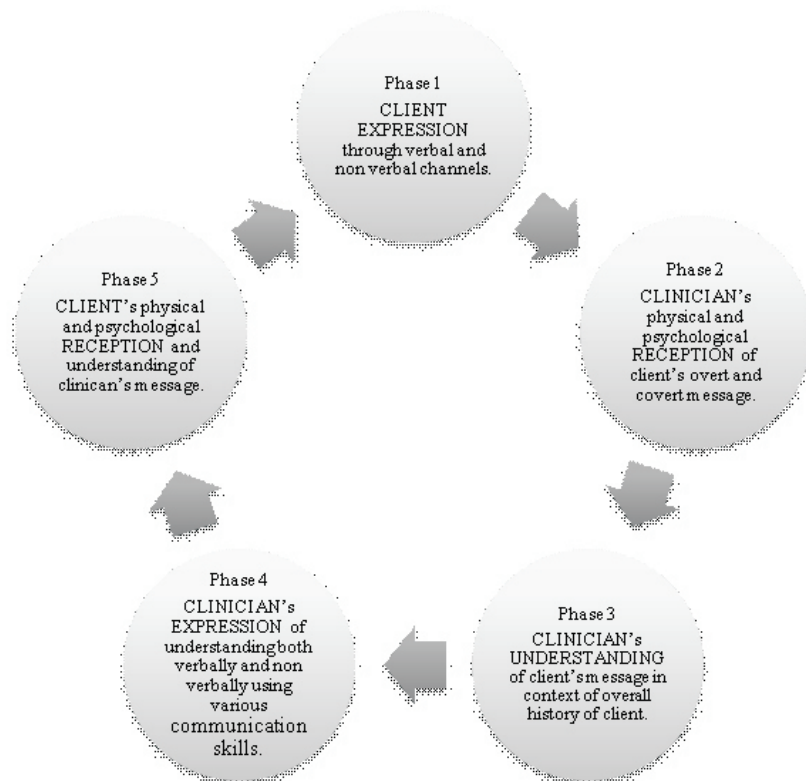
Kaira who was earlier seen as reluctant towards therapy decides to go for it only when she accidentally hears Dr. Jahangir Khan at a mental health seminar in Goa. It is the first time when her perspective towards therapy changes.

‘Dear Zindagi’ has been chosen for the purpose of this paper since it turns out to be one

of the earliest efforts by Indian movie makers towards the importance of therapy. It not only limits itself to therapies but something which can be called as an empathic therapy. The process of portraying empathy during therapy through gestures, verbal and non verbal communications etc has been explained using 5 different phases.

**Empathic Skillfulness**

Empathy not only fosters understanding but also enables an individual to anticipate another person’s responses. No matter what role we play in life, empathy remains the primary tool by which we come to understand and communicate effectively with others (Rowe and MacIssac, 1986). The process of empathic skilfulness is seen as a cyclic procedure revolving through various phases by many eminent theorists and researchers. This cyclic process is as follows:



These phases as seen in context with the movie can be described as follows:

### Phase 1

The first phase of empathic skilfulness is marked by client's self disclosure and self expression either verbally or non-verbally. It is a necessary element in order to carry forward the whole process of empathic skilfulness.

Self revelation on part of Kaira is very well displayed in the movie by the careful use of verbal and non verbal language.

For instance, in the first session, Kaira expresses a concern of not being able to sleep at nights and mentions the recent major changes of her life to be moving from Mumbai to Goa.

Hesitating to tell the clinician about the core issue, the client reframes her own issue in the name of her friend. Simultaneously, acceptance that the issue is her own is shown non-verbally by the client.

For e.g., Kaira (on being asked why have you shifted from Mumbai to Goa): (silence) you know...I came to Goa...um...for my friend. She is having issues with this guy (avoids eye contact). Basically she had a liking for a guy (stammers) and she thought that the boy likes her too but he got engaged. Or in this case where Kaira (on being asked whether her friend is okay or not) says-"I don't think so she is okay since her dream job is also related to this guy and I don't know what to suggest her so that she is able to deal with this situation. Sometimes I feel like saying her to stay quiet and do the job and at other times I feel like saying her to shut up. It's a matter of your self-respect (makes no eye contact, shows disappointment and uncertainty)."

It is natural on part of the client to show a great extent of defensiveness initially in the first session. It is majorly due to a fear of criticism or any sort of unfavourable judgement from the therapist as a result of which the client usually filters out the necessary aspects of

information that is to be communicated. The role of the therapist here is to pay careful attention to the client's verbal and non verbal cues in order to identify any sort of inconsistency and accurately perceive the latent as well as manifest content of client's communication.

The hurdle is consequently overcome after formation of sufficient rapport and the development of trust on the therapist and eventually the client is then seen as entering into more mature and genuine self disclosures. For e.g., Kaira reveal exactly how she felt in her dream and how the world looks down upon a woman with more than one relationship in subsequent sessions.

She expresses herself non-verbally in later sessions where she hums a song or lays down on the couch, mummurs something to herself and continuously waggles her foot or through other kinaesthetic movements (facial expressions, movement of head, neck, shoulders, arms, legs, feet and body) and paralinguistic variations (change of tone, pitch, volume, rate and fluency of speech).

In order to initiate client's back to back disclosures, the mental health care provider makes use of several encouragers, restatements, paraphrases and reflections to facilitate client to share with him those topics that are of importance and concern to the client. All these are essential communication skills that enhance the quality of therapeutic exchange. From the Welfel and Patterson (2005) lists of leads, an analogy can be drawn of the least leading response to the most leading response that can be used by a therapist, each accompanied with an example from the movie:

### Least To Most Leading Response

1. Silence: Dr. Khan makes no verbal response when Kaira describes her dream.
2. Acceptance: When Dr. Khan uses phrases like "hmm", "yes", "uhuh" in order to keep Kaira continue her talk.

3. Restatement: The therapist restates the client's verbalizations using nearly the same wording in order to prompt the client to re-examine what has been said. For instance, in order to let Kaira realize that he has caught her rephrasing her problems in the name of someone else without making her feel offended, Dr. Khan intelligently restates her statements in terms of asking clarifications by saying-“aur tumhe nind islie nahi aati kyunki tum poori raat yeh sochti rehti ho ki tum apni friend ko shut up bolo ya nahi”. When the phrases are rephrased in the clinician's language, they are called as Paraphrases. Dr. Khan has used paraphrases to normalize the intensity of affects shown by Kaira.
4. Clarification: The aim of these phrases is to clarify the client's meaning like when Dr. Khan and Kaira converse on Dunbar's number and Kaira says that she feels special, important, respected, happy and safe with her friends as compared to that of her boy-friend. To this, Dr. Khan puts up a clarifier-“tum apne boyfriends k sath safe feel nahi karti?” letting Kaira give her feelings a thought.
5. Approval: Dr. Khan affirms the correctness of information by using phrases like “See you figured it out yourself” which encourages the client's effort at self-determination.
6. General leads: Dr. Khan used phrase like “Go on, mai sun raha hoon” to encourage Kaira to talk more on a specific topic.
7. Interpretation: the counsellor uses psychodiagnostic principles to suggest sources of the client's stress and explains client's behaviour such as the interpretation that went on after the catharsis of Kaira where Khan explained Kaira how her repressed fears of past are affecting her present relationships.
8. Rejection (persuasion): The counsellor tries to reverse the client's behaviour or perceptions by actively advising different behaviours or suggesting different interpretations of life events than those presented by the client. For e.g., when Khan requests Kaira to look at her parents as normal people who committed certain mistakes in life and try to understand them from their perspective.
9. Reassurance: This involves reassuring the client that their concern is not unusual and people with similar problems have succeeded in overcoming them. For instance when Dr. Khan explains Kaira that it is common and natural to develop attraction towards your therapist and it is good that instead of making it complicated for yourself, you spoke about your feelings.
10. Introducing new information or new idea: The counsellor moves away from the client's last statement and prompts the client to consider new material such as the introduction of the Dunbar's study by Dr. Khan.

#### **Most to Least Leading Response**

All these responses are essential communication skills that enhance the quality of therapeutic exchange and ensure a continuous flow of verbalizations.

#### **Phase 2**

Phase 2 is concerned with therapist's reception of client's messages being greatly dependent upon the therapist's ability to hear, see and sense what the client is attempting to communicate. Dr. Khan in the movie pays

attention to not only the client's overt verbal messages but also on the hidden and the non verbal messages of the client.

Dr. Khan was fully aware that Kaira was avoiding eye contact, stammered in between and also displayed nervousness during the first interaction.

In later sessions, Dr. Khan hears Kaira's message that how can she like being in Goa since it is her parent's house and also that there is a homecoming party for her younger brother-Kiddo while nobody even welcomed her when she came to Goa.

Here the clinician hears the obvious overt verbal message but also notices the hidden message that showed the strained relationship between Kaira and her parents.

Dr. Khan recognizes that Kaira may become ready to talk about her childhood and her relationship with her parents after being facilitated to explore more into those areas. He very carefully keeps away his preconceived notions, biases, personal reactions, counter transferences, stereotypes, beliefs and expectations while listening in order to minimize any influence on the reception of information provided by the client.

Empathy is different from sympathy. Sympathizing with the client may make the client feel better at that very moment but does not give a solution to the client's problem. By successfully avoiding to sympathize with the client, Dr. Khan perceives the actual experience of the client and also recognises the depth and intensity of such experiences. He facilitates the continuous flow of these experiences by appropriate use of pauses in order to let the client explore more of their situation. This way, the therapist indulges into prolonged/ long term empathic immersion (Kohut,1977) in the psychological field of the client.

Accurate and active listening skills are necessary for reception.

### Phase 3

Once the reception phase is mastered successfully and the clinician has accurately (physically and psychologically) received the client's message, it is necessary to process the information in the context of the client's overall history.

The therapist in this phase makes sense of the client's communications both verbal and non-verbal. This aspect of empathy is most susceptible to the therapist's theoretical preferences (Patterson & Welfd, 1990). Since an eclectic approach has been used in 'Dear Zindagi', Dr. Jahangir Khan looked for all that is:

- A) Kaira's irrational beliefs (for e.g., a woman with more than two relationships is seen as disreputable or loose character and hence the society will look at her the same way) from the cognitive perspective.
- B) Lack of genuineness and congruence in Kaira's communication from the humanistic perspective.
- C) From the psychodynamic perspective, the specific needs of Kaira, childhood failures to achieve those needs, repressed motives and fears that are affecting her current relationships and self perceptions (her relationship with parents, childhood fears and traumas, dream interpretation).

The information is processed by taking all these factors together in the light of the client's overall past history, developmental history, family circumstances, cultural embeddedness, inter personal values and present level of functioning. Dr Khan for instance understands Kaira's inability to get into stable relationships because of her constant repressed fear of being left alone. Raghuvendra, her ex boyfriend cheating upon her was very traumatic



as an experience because it triggered those repressed childhood fears. Because of a deprived affective environment from her parents in the early years of life, Kaira does craves for healthy relationship with them but fears them at the same time (approach avoidance conflict).

The empathy expressed during this phase serves as the measure to accurately process the information provided by the client in order to develop a proper understanding of the client. It is because empathy enables the therapist to look into the client's situation from the client's perspective. This understanding later helps the therapists to facilitate client towards self awareness.

Kohut (1982,84) defined empathy as vicarious introspection. This phase of empathic skilfulness clearly resembles to Kohut's definition. Hence, vicarious introspection enables the clinician to not only understand the client's situation but also understand how the client feels in that situation.

Dr Khan portrays good cognitive skills which are a prerequisite for this phase in order to make proper sense of Kaira's reactions, feelings, thoughts and behaviour in the context of her needs, functioning level and life circumstances.

#### **Phase 4**

Phase 4 is concerned with the clinician's expression of what he or she understood of the client's situation with appropriate use of cognitive and affective skills. For e.g., Dr Khan explains Kaira her repressed fears and lets her develop an insight about the "why" aspect of her behaviour and worries. For the explanation to be empathic in nature, it must be delivered in a genuine and warm manner, often combined with care and respect for the client.

Appropriate justification to the explanation given is essential or else it will serve as an empathic failure.

For instance, when Kaira feels offended with Dr Khan's statement that she is a young and

smart woman and would definitely have many people who like her, he justifies it using the chair example (refer the 2nd therapeutic encounter timed at 1:04:37 in the movie) which fairly convinces Kaira. If not, the justification would have served as a pitfall.

Dr Khan also summarizes his explanations using simple phrases like-"don't let your past blackmail your present to ruin a beautiful future." He also avoided the use of technical words or jargons and at times when Dr. Khan felt that his statements (e.g.,-"we all are our own teachers in the school of life") were heavy for Kaira to understand, he simplified them by relating it to common life examples.

Apart from the use of verbalizations, it is essential that the therapist's nonverbal language is in congruence and communicates care and warmth to the client. Dr Jahangir Khan displays it well with an appropriate body posture, sufficient eye contact, facial expressions, hand leg movements, head movements, pauses and appropriate use of paralinguistic variations.

As a good therapist Dr Jahangir Khan shows patience and does not jumps to conclusions. Explanations were only given to Kaira once an appropriate rapport was developed. During explanations Dr Khan makes sure that his voice is soothing to Kaira and uses a volume that is sufficient to be heard. At time when Kaira was offended or had intense self disclosures during catharsis that involved an outburst of emotions, Dr. Khan patiently waits for her to get into a stable emotional state that is receptive to his input.

#### **Phase 5**

Phase 5 is concerned with the client's reception of what the therapist has explained. Dr Khan shows complete awareness to how Kaira reacts to different modes of expressions and delivers his messages with confidence and little authority.

He also uses expressions that have a hidden or disguised meaning in them to allow Kaira spend some time thinking about those domains and exploring more of them. For example, he uses phrases like “har tooti hui chiz jodi ja sakti hai”. He also asks Kaira –“why can’t she feel safe with her boyfriends?” Kaira pays attention to these messages and also perceives the latent content which lets her dig into various other areas of her life.

Kaira’s modality of language is kinaesthetic in nature that is she uses words like “I felt dirty, cheap” and at other times when she uses the phrase “mujhe aisa laga (I sense)”. She also makes use of an affect based vocabulary which is more oriented to the description of emotional experiences.

Dr. Khan matched Kaira’s modality of expression to some extent in order to increase the likelihood of being heard by Kaira. Kaira after successfully receiving Dr. Khan’s message feels acknowledged, affirmed, accepted, heard and understood. And because she does not feels the

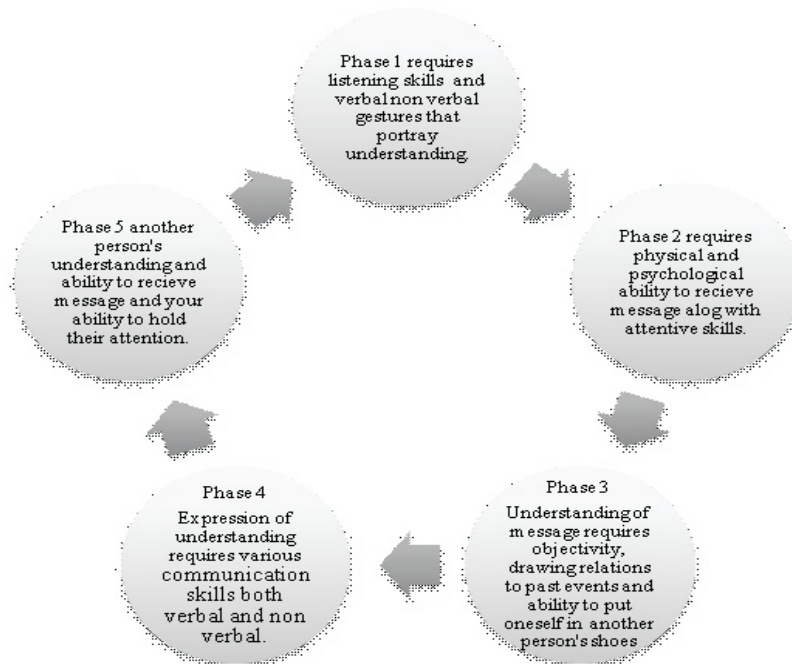
same in her day to day interactions with family and other related members except friends, the empathy shown by clinician has its curative effects on Kaira.

Once Kaira perceives the therapist’s message, she enters into another self disclosure and the phasic cycle continues.

### Applying empathic phases to communications

Many people are born with empathy as a trait in them. However, others may develop it to a lesser or greater degree over time. At times, empathy itself qualifies as a therapy and hence developing it to its maximum potential would not only help us strengthen our relationships but also develop compassion and facilitate pro-social and helping behaviours that come from within.

Developing empathy is not a simple task and requires several skills and behaviours. The phases can be applied to everyday communications and therapy by practising the skills and behaviours respective of each phase.



### Implications

Thus, with this paper we aim to emphasize upon empathy as a facilitator in client-counsellor interaction. For students and professionals in psychology, the paper is a practical example upon the use of empathy during therapy. It highlights the importance of empathy and how skilfully and rhythmically empathy can be used during the course of working alliance between the client and the therapist. It represents a stage wise description of empathic skilfulness with the use of examples from the movie itself. Empathy as a skill requires fair amount of insight on the part of the therapist so as to help the client achieve the fullest awareness and healing. It facilitates communication and client self-disclosure. An amalgamation of various therapies along with significant portrayal of empathy has been seen as efficient in bringing change into the client's affect, behaviour and cognitions and the paper portrays the same using examples to foster understanding.

Therapist's across the globe recognize the fact that every relationship, if empathetic can itself be therapeutic and hence readers from non-psychological background can also imply the phases of empathy in their everyday conversations to promote healthy therapeutic relationships.

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