**INTERPRETATION**

**INSIGHT STAGE**

**Suggested assignment:** Before completing the exercises, read chapter 14 ("Interpretation") in *Helping Skills*. Pay particular attention to the five steps on how to challenge.

**Definition:** An interpretation is a statement that goes beyond what the client has overtly stated or recognized and gives a new meaning, reason, or explanation for behaviors, thoughts, or feelings so clients can see problems in a new way. Interpretations can help make connections between seemingly isolated statements of events, can point out themes or patterns, or can offer a new framework for understanding.

**Intentions:** To promote insight, to identify and intensify feelings, to promote self-control

**Helpful hints:**
- Pave the way for interpretations with empathy, reflection of feelings, and challenges.
- Collaborate with the client in trying to figure out the origins of the problem, his or her role in the problem, and why the problem continues. Base interpretations on a shared understanding of the client’s motives, defenses, needs, childhood experiences, interactional styles, life stage, and existential issues (e.g., freedom, isolation, death, and meaning in life).
- Keep interpretations short and at moderate depth, and deliver them tentatively and with empathy.
- Observe the client’s verbal and nonverbal reactions to your interpretation. Leave enough time to discuss interpretations thoroughly.
- Follow interpretations with open questions, restatements, and reflection of feelings.

**Difficulties helpers may experience:**
- Avoiding interpretations for fear of being intrusive or wrong
- Using interpretations to show off their intellectual understanding and insight
- Providing too many interpretations in a single session
- Using interpretations prematurely, before the client has indicated a readiness or an interest in understanding why their problems persist

**For class discussion:** Sometimes a client will reject an interpretation. Discuss why this might be so and consider the most helpful ways to respond to a client who has rejected an interpretation.

**Practice Exercises for Interpretation**

1. **CLIENT:** When I go to speak in front of a group, I totally panic. I freeze up and can’t think of anything to say. I feel like I’m going to start blithering and be incoherent. It’s crazy because I’ve been doing public speaking for a long time, but it never seems to get any better. I just don’t seem to have any confidence or think I have anything worth saying. I think I’ve always been this way. Even in grade school, I remember the kids teasing me because I blushed whenever I had to say anything in class. I don’t know why I was embarrassed then because my parents always encouraged me to speak in public. In fact, they entered me in all these contests for public speaking and coached me so that I would be good, and they really wanted me to win. So they did a lot to help me with this problem.

   Helper response:

2. **CLIENT:** I had a really bad blowup with my boyfriend. He was half an hour late coming to get me for a dinner we had arranged with another couple. I was just furious by the time he got there. It seems like he’s always late, and I feel like he is just inconsiderate of me. So I got really angry at him when he came, and it ruined the evening. He was angry at me the whole time. He pointed out that he had told me he might be late. I ended up apologizing to him profusely because he was right that he had said he might be late. I
don’t want to lose him because this is the best relationship I’ve ever had. But I don’t understand why I always feel so lousy after we are together.

Helper response:

3. CLIENT: I am nervous about meeting this woman tonight. I answered an ad in the personals because I really want to start dating, but I don’t know if this is such a good idea. I mean, what kind of people advertise in the personals? She might be a real wacko. I have pretty high standards for whom I go out with, and I don’t want to waste time if we don’t get along. My past experiences have been pretty bad with dating. I go out and find someone I like, but then they never want to go out with me again.

Helper response:

4. CLIENT: I just got back from visiting my family for Thanksgiving, and once again, I felt inadequate. My older brother was there and he talked the whole time about how wonderful he is doing in his new position in a law firm. He entertained the family over dinner with all the cases he is working on. I just felt like I couldn’t get a word in edgewise and that nobody was interested in what I was doing. It reminds me of my whole childhood where I felt like I couldn’t compete with him because he was always the older, better brother.

Helper response: