

Consider a male high school student who just got caught cheating on a test. In talking with the school social worker, he expressed feelings of remorse and shame. These two feelings would be considered very similar. At the same time, he may feel as though the teacher was out to get him. Helping shed light on where some of the conflict between feelings may lie can open up other areas of exploration. For example, what may be contributing to the student's feeling of being targeted by the teacher? Are there similar situations that may have occurred in the student's past? Does he often feel misunderstood and see himself as a victim of circumstance? What personal meaning does the student ascribe to the situation? Discussing his conflicting feelings can assist the social worker in helping the student develop insight into his feelings and in developing a plan of action. Once the student has an understanding of his feelings, even if they are still conflicting, the social worker can practice, in a role play, for example, ways to approach the teacher that are respectful but that also get his point across.

Sometimes clients appear to justify their feelings as a way to protect themselves from unwanted feelings, experiences, or emotional responses. The social worker may see the situation differently and can point out some of the inconsistencies. However, never attempt to *tell* the client how he or she feels; you can only offer your perspective. To force a feeling on a client who is not ready to delve into that arena would be considered a pitfall, such as premature interpretation or confrontation.

Stay with feelings in the moment; for example, "Right now I get the sense that you are uncomfortable talking about your dad. Your tone of voice changed, and you are fidgeting in your chair. Let's talk about what is so painful for you in relation to your dad." This gives the client feedback and allows for on-the-spot, in-the-moment discussion and focus. Box 5.6 demonstrates the social worker utilizing the skill of reflection of feeling.

#### Box 5.6 Eileen—Reflection of Feeling

**E**ileen is a 35-year-old female seeing a social worker because of depression. She has recently remembered episodes of childhood sexual abuse by an adult relative. She has managed to avoid the issue for 20 years.

**Eileen:** I just don't know how to deal with this pain.

**Social Worker:** It's a lot to digest. Right now you're hurting and feeling very confused. (Reflection of feeling)

**Eileen:** I just wish I could run away from the world.

**Social Worker:** I imagine that your memories of the abuse are having an overwhelming effect on you. (Lead in response/reflection of feeling)

**Eileen:** I just never really thought about it before. It makes me so crazy. I'm having a difficult time staying focused at work and at home.

**Social Worker:** That's understandable. You are trying to make sense of what happened to you. It was a frightening and scary time. (Lead-in response/reflection of feeling)

**Eileen:** Yeah, it was. I know it is important to deal with this. I've had it from myself for so many years. I never really let myself feel anything.

▶ Watch this clip as Maria reflects back to Anna how hard this journey has been. But regardless of her health status there is a sense of hope that Anna feels, too.

The social worker in this case is validating Eileen's ambivalent emotions. Eileen begins to realize how the experience of abuse has had a significant impact on her life. By helping Eileen identify the layers of feelings and thoughts, she will gain more insight into her problem, which will lead to progress in functioning more effectively and alleviating

feelings of distress. Eileen recognizes that she has hidden her feelings for a long time. By acknowledging this, she has gained insight into how sexual abuse as a child affects her current relationships ("I never really let myself feel anything").

The example in Box 5.6 also illustrates that it is important for the social worker to have a rich vocabulary of feeling words in order to match the affect of the client and to mirror the client's depth and intensity of feeling. For example, a social worker who is working with a depressed client can use words ranging from "down" (mild expression of sadness), "deflected" (moderate expression), or "hopeless" (strong expression) in reflecting feelings back to the client, depending on the intensity of the client's feelings.

Box 5.7 displays a list of feeling words, starting from the most intense or strong to the least intense. There is variation throughout this list, and, of course, the student may interpret these feeling words differently. Use these categories as a guide.

In conclusion, there are a few additional points to consider regarding the reflection of feeling skill:

- Feelings have two dimensions: the *category* of the affect, such as happy, angry, sad, and fearful, and the *intensity* of the affect (Hepworth et al., 2013). To accurately reflect feelings, the social worker must be cognizant of and use both dimensions of this skill. Grasping the intensity of a feeling and matching it with the appropriate overarching feeling (or shades of a feeling) takes skill and time to develop. Always be mindful of your tone of voice, as it can convey intensity, depending on the loudness, softness, tenderness, or harshness of your response.
- Cultures vary in the extent to which emotions are expressed (Corrêier et al., 2011). You may have a very expressive client who is Italian American or a very reserved client whose family comes from Japan, as in Interactive Case Study #5. Sue and Sue (2003) observed that Asian Americans value the restraint of strong feelings.
- Consider the cultural context of your client's life when using a reflection of feeling during the interview process. Keep in mind that in collectivistic cultures (where the client's identity emphasis lies within the family and community), such as Asian and Native American cultures, affective expression is likely to be withheld. It means that the client is experiencing the feeling but is reluctant to express it outright.
- Strong feelings can interfere with your client's ability to think clearly about a situation. Giving the client the opportunity to vent and then restating the affective message (in a calmer voice) can help to deescalate the client and lead to more rational and thoughtful action. For example, your client Joanne is very upset with Manny, her landlord, regarding his lack of response to repeated complaints. The sink has been leaking, and now the flooring is damaged. Your client is threatening to sue Manny and bring this matter to a housing inspection officer. Feeling mistreated and ignored, she threatened to do further damage to the apartment. You do want to determine and assess the seriousness of her plan or if she is venting to "blow off steam." Having someone acknowledge how upset you are can serve as a "safety valve." This can be a releasing and healing experience simultaneously.
- As a social worker, do not convey that you may be afraid or intimidated by your client's strong feelings. Empathy and understanding is your best response. Ultimately, sometimes the social worker can be the misplaced target of the client's feelings, such as anger, hurt, or jealousy. Staying calm and centered is the best way to respond. However, if you sense that the client is threatening you, always follow the safety plan of your agency.