

Attunement – Being aware and responsive to emotions

Empathy and Attunement - What are they?

- Empathy is the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation (Cambridge Dictionary)
- Attunement is about being aware of, and responsive to, another person. In other words how we recognise and respond to another person's emotional needs and moods.
- When we empathically attune to another we gently tune into, sense, and resonate with their experience making it possible for us to reflect back accurately to them that we have understood how they are feeling, that they have been listened to and heard.
- Effective empathetic and attuned communication requires your full attention and emotional presence.
- Empathy and attunement together underpin relationships and evidence shows how they are the most effective elements of supportive and healing relationships (Cooper, 2008)

Why do I need to know it?

- Attunement helps us relate to and connect with others. In the context of education, this could be learners, colleagues, parents and carers, partners, or anyone within the learning community. This connection **helps us help them** to both learn and to cope when they become distressed.

How does Attunement link to Attachment and Nurture?

- Attunement allows us to not just observe a person's behaviour but to be more able to identify what that behaviour means (Nurture Principle 5 – all behaviour is communication) i.e., what they are thinking or feeling, such as, joy or satisfaction, or alternatively shame or hopelessness. In other words the things that improve their wellbeing or make them more vulnerable. This knowledge helps us to adjust our approach to better meet the needs of that person. Becoming attuned is a key element to supporting others particularly those with attachment issues, complex needs, or communication difficulties. Being attuned to someone allows us to act quickly to help when we notice they are not coping or are becoming distressed.
- We can use attunement to help build a relationship, or an attachment, by getting to know the other person well and closely observing their behaviour, empathising with them, listening to them, and responding to them in a way that shows we've listened and understood them.

Applying the Principles of Attunement

- Being attuned to another person is a progressive process and is closely linked with the building of a trusting relationship. In a similar way to learning a new skill one person may initially have to lead the process but ultimately this should progress to a two-way reciprocal relationship. Being attuned to someone is usually expressed, at least initially, through our non-verbal communication – eye contact, facial expression, body language, tone of voice – rather than in the words that we use. Always be mindful of different needs and cultural differences, for example, some people find eye contact threatening and some cultures find it disrespectful, some people find reading facial expressions difficult, etc.. However attunement and non-verbal communication become particularly relevant when language is a barrier to effective communication. Here are some ways that we can demonstrate the principles of attunement:
- **Being attentive** – Turning towards the person, regularly looking towards them and making eye contact, looking interested, using nods and encouraging intonations (uh-huh, yes, go on..), adopting a friendly and non-threatening pose, using proximity or giving them space as needed, or giving them time to calm themselves or recover but also showing them that they aren't being ignored.

Information Note

- **Encouraging** – Actively listening, being emotionally available and positive, introducing humour/playfulness (if appropriate), beginning to name what you notice (I can see that you are upset, I can hear your frustration...), waiting for a response and being comfortable with short silences.
- **Receiving** – Beginning to repeat or reflect back what they told you to show that you have heard them and understand, matching and mirroring their body language to encourage them to open up further, using their words rather than the professionalised version of their words, wondering aloud (I wonder if..) to further explore thoughts and feelings.
- **Being attuned together** – Bringing the conversation onto a more equal and more cooperative footing by taking turns to talk, sharing thinking and feelings, regularly checking for understanding, helping them connect their thinking and feelings with their behaviour if they haven't already done so.
- **Guiding and supporting** - This won't be effective if you haven't already attuned to the other person through the previous steps. This step may involve simplifying things to make them more understandable for the other person, exploring ideas, alternatives or choices, problem solving, or providing more information or practical help. Judgement is required as to how much support and guidance the other person requires. Some people will not want support and guidance – dependent on their early attachment experiences – they may avoid interdependence and through our attuned responses we may need to help them to be more comfortable with that so that we can guide them. Some people will be over-dependent and want a lot of guidance – again we have to help them to move away from this.
- **Deepening Discussion** – At this stage if we are attuned to the other person and we have a trusting relationship then we can use activating questions to stimulate the other persons thinking and address 'wonky' thinking or assumptions, we can also voice our own opinions and demonstrate that it's OK to have differences of opinion (without being permissive of inappropriate behaviours)

Things to remember

- Every person is different. To be able to attune to a someone else we must first observe and remember their unique style of engagement and communication, and their strengths and vulnerabilities, to be able to best respond to their individual needs.
- Try to notice changes in the non-verbal communication of learners, for example in their facial expressions, tone of voice, level of activity etc. to respond early to issues.
- Be very aware on our own non-verbal communication particularly our facial expression as it could express interest, curiosity, joy, anger, or even disgust.
- Be aware that our age, role, or perceived status may put us in a position of influence. When this is the case, always remember, our words, actions and expressions are magnified. Our criticism can feel crushing, but our approval can be motivating, energizing and powerful.
- Being attuned to individuals within a group will also help us to respond to issues caused by the social dynamics of that.

Additional helpful resources and information

- Related Modules: Active Listening, Relationships Matter, Relational Approaches, Window of Tolerance, The Brain and Emotional Regulation, RRRR, Self-Regulation, and Co-Regulation & De-escalation
- [Attunement Profile](https://education.gov.scot/media/2cbbaekj/inc55applyingnurturingapproaches120617.pdf) from [Applying Nurture as a Whole School Approach](#)
- [Attunement Principles](https://sites.google.com/ab-ed.org/educational-psychology-service/school-staff/supporting-our-pupils/attunement-principles): Education Psychology Service Hub (Aberdeen City) [https://sites.google.com/ab-ed.org/educational-psychology-service/school-staff/supporting-our-pupils/attunement-principles]
- [Emphasising and Attuning](http://relational-integrative-psychotherapy.uk/chapters/empathising-and-attuning/): Finlay, L (2023) Chapter 4 Relational and Integrative Psychotherapy. Wiley Blackwell. [http://relational-integrative-psychotherapy.uk/chapters/empathising-and-attuning/]
- Maynard, N & B Weinstein (2020) Hacking School Discipline – 9 ways to create a culture of empathy & responsibility.. Times 10 Publications
- [How to be a good adult | from The Children and young people's mental health & wellbeing : A Knowledge and Skills Framework for the Scottish Workforce \(nhs.scot\)](https://www.digitallearningmap.nhs.scot/how-to-be-a-good-adult/) [https://www.digitallearningmap.nhs.scot/how-to-be-a-good-adult/]