

5b3

Interpretation

Do

Influence others so that the person is viewed in an enhancing way to others.

Story

'To interpret someone in an enhancing way is not only nice for the person, but it can indirectly promote further positive interactions between individuals with and without disabilities. The individual is portrayed as being interesting both worthy and capable of establishing a relationship. One day, Tony was being teased. Olivia interrupted and asked if people knew that Tony had saved a man's life. His neighbour tried

to commit suicide by turning on gas. Tony tried to break in then called out the caretaker. The two of them broke down the door and rescued the man. Olivia prompted Tony to tell the whole story by the end, the others were telling Tony how brave he had been' (*Lutfiyya 1991*)

Hints & Hazards

Goffman (1961) writes about ‘passing’ – using disguise and secrecy to appear non-disabled. In contrast, what he calls ‘covering’ (similar to our ‘interpretation’) acknowledges the whole of a person’s life.

Interpretation can also be used to show the similarity between a new activity and familiar activities. For example, a tutor was struggling to see how she could relate to someone who didn’t use verbal language. The worker reminded her of the first 18 months of her child’s life when she was very closely attuned to the baby’s feelings and understood many of the messages. Working with adults who do not use verbal language is different, but the woman already had some relevant skills.

Another time a colleague tutor was fearful of the prospect of working with a student who had mental health problems. ‘What will I do if he has a panic

attack?’ he questioned anxiously. The supporter reminded him that other students have the potential for health emergencies – epilepsy, angina, vomiting – and the tutor agreed that he readily responded to the crisis as it arose. A mental health emergency is similar and the tutor already had many relevant skills. So the feared ‘otherness’ of these experiences is re-interpreted.

Interpreting someone is about helping others to recognise their skills and gifts. If you are the interpreter think about why you like that person, why you enjoy spending time with them and what they contribute to your life. If you don’t know them well, with their permission, ask their family and friends the same questions. Sometimes it is difficult to talk about our own skills and gifts. One way to introduce this question is to help the person think about other people in their life and what they offer.