

Empathy through Engagement

Bridging Communication and
Embracing Sensitivity

April 2026

A D A P T [we change]
COMMUNITY NETWORK

Thoughts?

Do you feel bad for
him?

Sorry?

Compassion?

Nothing!

But it is funny



Vacuum cleaner going on	
Car horn	
Phone rings	
Mom closes her eyes	

**Feel Bad For or
Feel Bad With?**



Have Your
FELT This
before?

Feel Bad For or Feel With?



Auditors
show up...
at 6 am



A person supported
is trying to say they
are heartbroken, but
nobody understands
them.



Time
sheets
are due

WITH IS BETTER THAN FOR



A hand in a dark blue suit sleeve is shown from the top right, holding a red bridge that spans across a dark blue chasm. The bridge has a simple railing. The background is a light blue sky with a few white clouds. The overall style is clean and illustrative.

Communication

Sensitivity

Sympathy
Some words to
describe

EmPathy
Some words to
describe

Sympathy with a Capital S Focuses On

Staff Center
emotions not the
persons experiences.

Sorry for the person.
Shifts the attention to
your emotions, not
theirs.

Stand Apart –
creating a gap
instead of creating a
connection

Separates Staff and
person
supported although it
maybe unintentional.

EmPathy is the ability to understand how someone feels



Engaged with the person you're supporting. Empowering their voice and honoring their emotional reality



Exploring their emotions to understand what the situation is like for them



Person Centered & Person Perspective – through their eyes honoring their lived experience



Partner – in every step, not directed, this promotes independence and trust. It helps them feel respected and included

Brené Brown




COMMUNICATION

Communication is how a person expresses themselves and interacts with their world.



Communication is how a person express needs, feelings, and make sense of their world.



Communication supports self-expression, choice, and understanding for individuals with developmental disabilities.



**Understanding
what's being
communicated
takes work....not
assumptions.**

ADAPT
COMMUNITY NETWORK

[we change]

Let's Try It

Two Volunteers

- 1 person as staff
- 1 person as supported person
- Introduce yourself



How did it feel to be...

The Person Supported

Frustrated

Unheard

Impatient

Misunderstood

Angry

Helpless

Lonely

On edge

Confused

Anxious

The Direct Support Professional

Overwhelmed

Frustrated

Helpless

Isolated

Confused

Afraid

Anxious

Disconnected

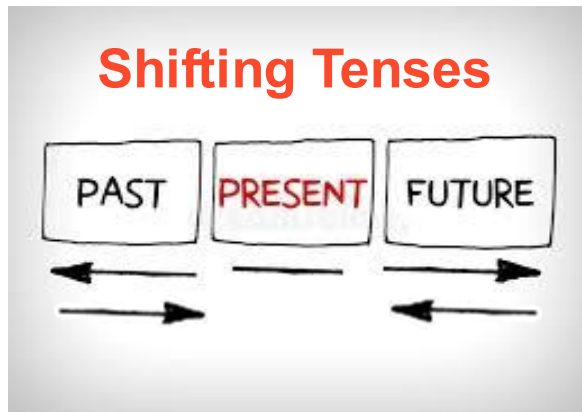
Excited

F.A.S.T. Does Not Work



F

A



S

T



What Does Work GO SLOW



S - Share



L - Listen



O - Observe



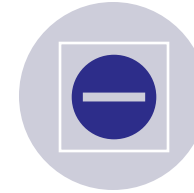
W - Wait

STAFF CAN ALSO ASK....

How do you say or communicate



YES



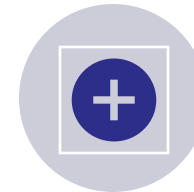
NO



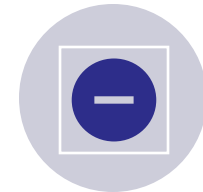
STOP



GO



MORE



LESS

Ways people supported express themselves

Without words

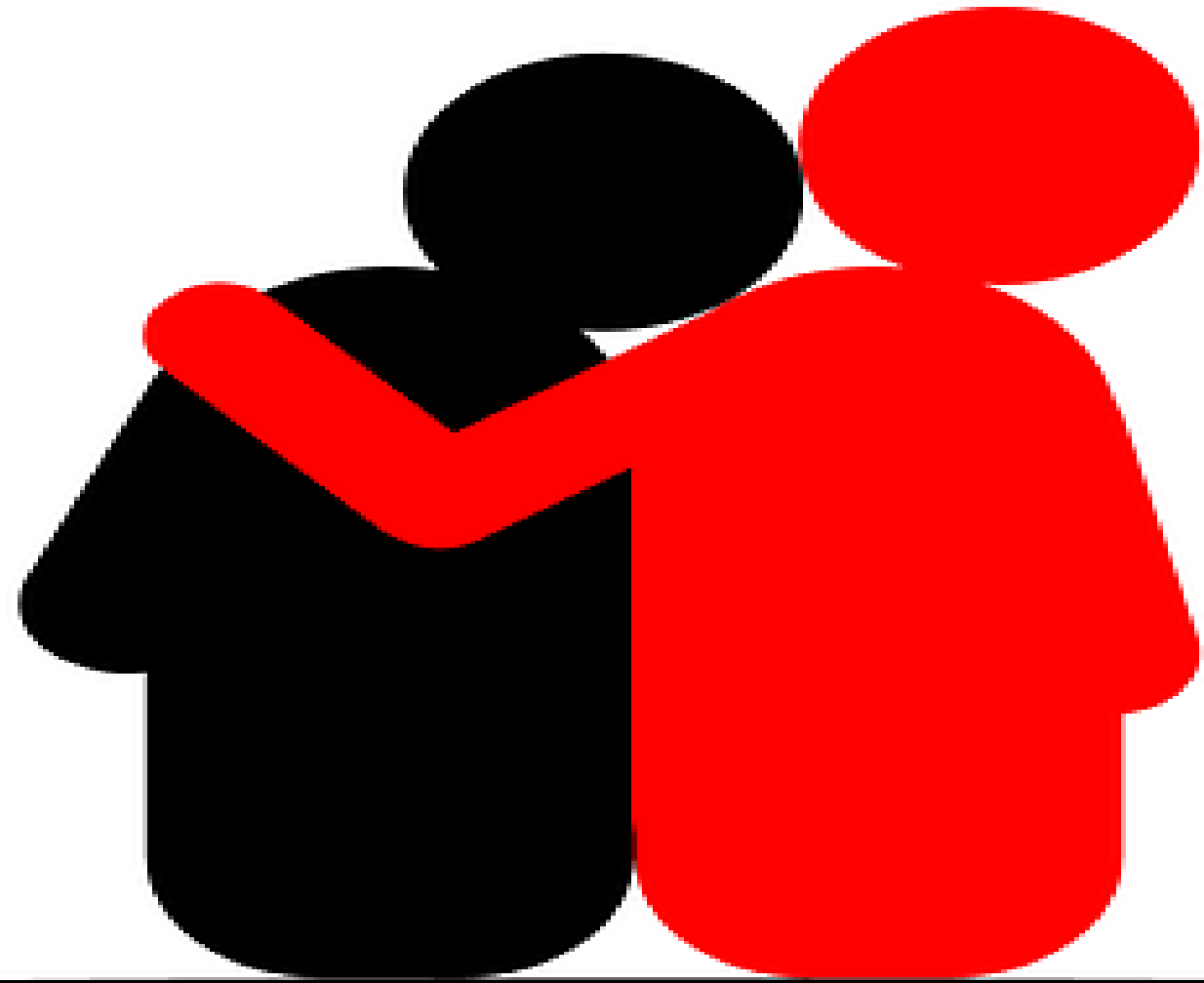
Gestures

Pictures

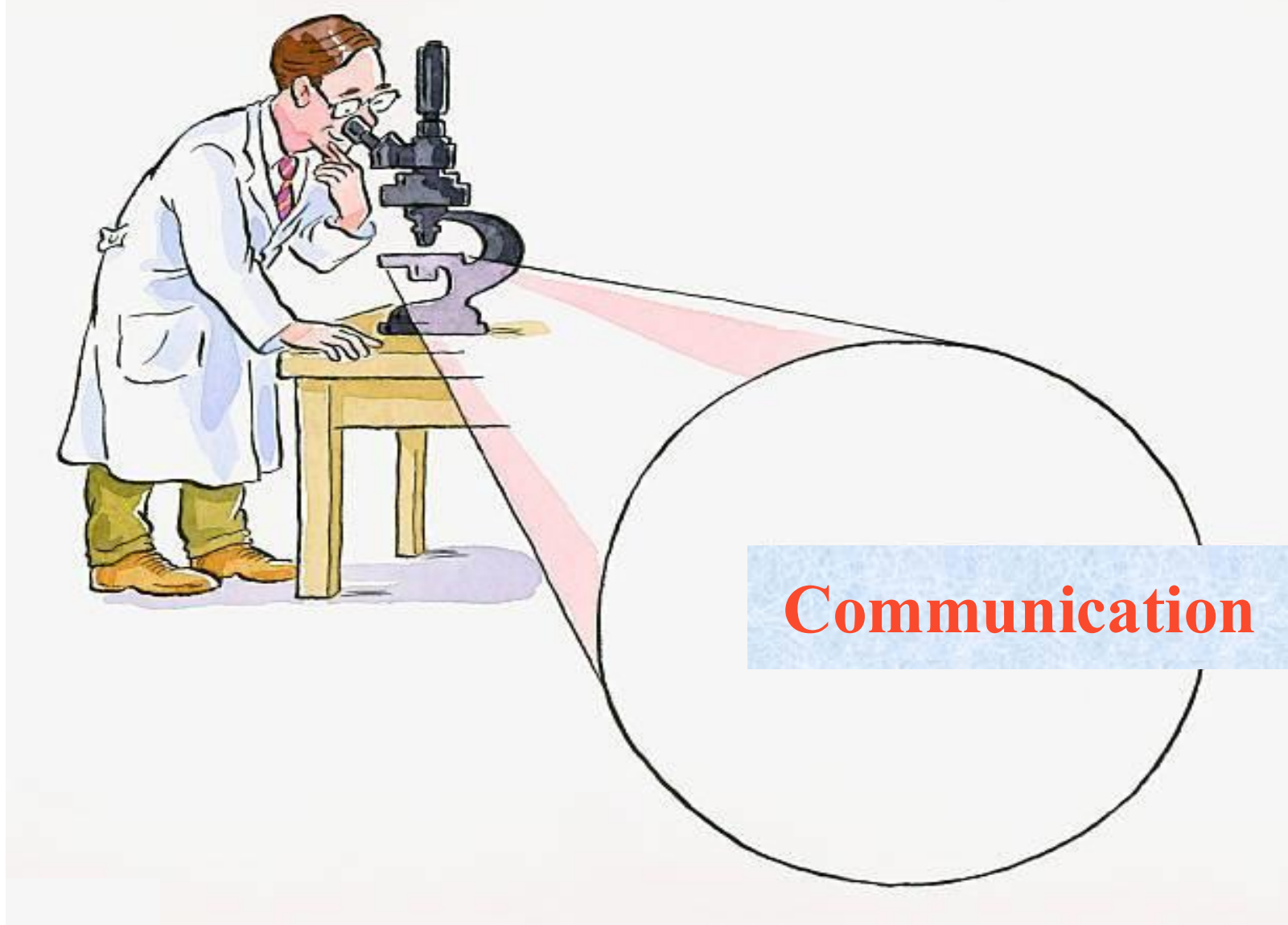
Eye gaze

Slowly

**Responding with
EMPATHY!!!**



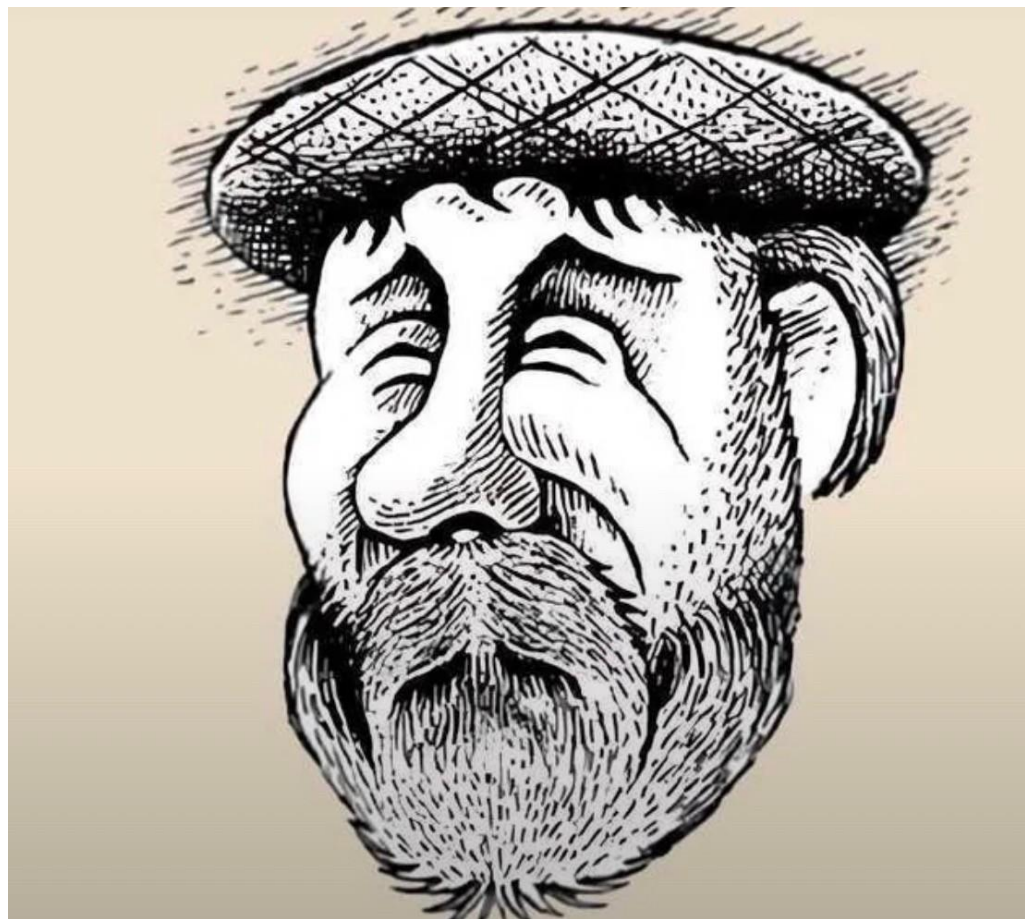
Looking Deeper Using Empathy



Looking Deeper



What Do You See?



One in a
million

Green Eggs and
Ham

You Are
Under
Arrest

Can You Figure These Out?

2 Left
Feet

TENNis
Shoes

Long Time, No
See (C)

Communication

SLOW;
Look Deeper



Engagement

Sensitivity

Empathy
Feel With

THE BEGINNING...

QUESTIONS?

THANK YOU

WITH THANKS

Stephanie W. – Training Assistant

Courtney M. – Training Assistant

Patricia Traynor – Sr. Coordinator of Workforce Development

Jim Duer– Sr. Coordinator of Workforce Development

Shirley Atwell– DSP Support Specialist