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COUNSELING SKILLS                       ****  
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COUNSELING SKILLS

Effective counseling, results in meaningful and measurable outcomes. No clients is left unchanged by any counseling relationship. All counseling is for better or worse. And the critical ingredient - the factor that most determines whether clients outcome will be positive or negative - is the counselor's repertoire of skills. Thus it is essential that every counselor acquire and be able to use the various counseling skills.

Thus our focus here is on skills that promote understanding of self and others. The skills have been group into six clusters.

1. Listening skills
2. Leading skills
3. Reflecting skills
4. Summarizing skills.
5. Confronting
6. Interpreting

1. Listening Skills

Counseling begins with communication. Someone is describing a problem, relating a concern, expressing troublesome feelings, or in some manner trying to communicate how life is not as he/she wants it to be. We begin most instances of counseling by listening.

At a glance the term listening implies a passive act of taking in the content of the client's communication. But actually it involves a very active process of responding to total messages. It includes not only listening with your ears to client's words and with your eyes to your client's body language, but a total kind of perceptiveness best described by Reik's (1948) phrase "listening with the third ear." Listening skills are basic to all interviewing whatever purpose including counseling.

Listening is purposeful and considered in counseling. It is intended to have helpful outcomes for the client. It is also hardwork. Listening involves trying to understand what the other person is thinking and why. It requires developing empathy with their circumstances, and being nonevaluative of their behavior.

When you listen actively, you are saying to the other person:

I accept you as you are. I'm trying to understand your concerns and empathize with your feelings. I'm interested in you. I'm attempting to avoid evaluating your thoughts and actions. I may or may not agree with them, but in this situation

my opinions are irrelevant. My purpose is to help you develop useful feelings and understanding about yourself.

- * Attending - is communicated primarily through 4 channels: eye contacts, posture, animation and verbal response. These communication modes offer cues to the client as to the level of acceptance, approval, agreement, rejection, or indifference associated with reinforcing behavior. The components which have been studied intensively by Ivey (1986) and others are as follows:

- a. Contact - What is good eye contact? You need not gaze fixedly at a client, but at the same time, frequent breaks in eye contact communicate non-attentiveness. Looking at other people, usually at their eyes, is a way of indicating interest in them, because eyes are one of our key vehicles for communicating. This does not mean that eye contact must be a fixed stare to be effective. If the counselor is honestly interested and at ease, he/she will look naturally at the client while he is talking. Eye contact can communicate genuinely to a client that we cared and understand what he/she is feeling. At the same time the counselor is picking up nonverbal messages from

the client's eyes.

- b. Posture. Usually the interested counselor leans towards the client in a relaxed manner. Relaxation is important because tenseness tends to shift the focus from the client to the counselor in addition to provoking an emphatic tense response in the client.
- c. Animation: is a facial expressions gives the client the feeling that you are alert and responding to his communications. It may be that your facial expressions serve as a kind of mirror for the client's feelings. Generally your facial expression should reflect the kind and intensity of the feeling being expressed by the client. Certainly an absence of facial expression (the proverbial dead-pan) will suggest a lack of interest, awareness, or mental presence to the client. Again, it is possible to be overly expressive. A smile is almost always more appropriate than a laugh (particularly when it is a nervous laugh). A continual smile becomes a negative stimulus. Frequent frowns can communicate disapproval. Occasional frowns, on the other hand, communicate the counselor's failure to follow or understand a particular point, and are therefore useful.

d. Verbal Response. The counselor's verbal response, relates to what the client has said. The counselor does not ask questions, take the topic in a new direction, nor add to the client's meaning, but the counselor might, for example, mention a word or reflect a phrase from the statements of the client to focus on an idea. Some confirming, yet not too personal, comment.

The following list is a summary of guidelines for effective attending behavior:

1. Establish contact through looking at clients when they talk.
2. Maintain a natural relaxed posture that indicates your interest.
3. Use natural gestures that communicate your intended messages.
4. Use verbal statements that relate to client statements without interruptions, questions, or new topics.

* Paraphrasing - a method of restating the client's basic message in similar, but usually fewer, words. The main purpose of paraphrasing is for counselors

to test their understanding of what the client has said. Second purpose is to communicate to clients that you are trying to understand their basic message, and, if successful, that you have followed their verbal explorations.

Paraphrasing is especially helpful in exposing and clarifying the mixed or double message. The task of the counselor is to pick up the two messages from both verbal and nonverbal ones and restate them in clear form.

Clients feel understood as a consequence of paraphrasing. It may clarify their perception of what they have said and give a sense of direction to their rambling statements.

Guidelines for paraphrasing:

- a. Listen for the basic message of the client.
- b. Restate to the client a concise and simple summary of the basic message.
- c. Observe a cue, or ask for a response, from the client that confirms or denies the accuracy and helpfulness of the paraphrase for promoting understanding.

- * Clarifying - brings vague material into focus. It goes beyond simple paraphrasing in that the counselor makes a guess regarding the client's basic message and offers it to the client. A Counselor also may ask for clarification when he or she cannot make sense out of the client's responses.

Guidelines for clarifying are:-

1. Admit confusion about client's meaning.
2. Try a restatement or ask for clarification, repetition, or illustration.

2. Leading

The purpose of leading is to encourage the client to respond to open communication. Although leading skills are used throughout the counseling process, they are useful particularly in the opening stages of a counseling relationship to invite verbal expression.

More specific objectives of leading are: (1) to encourage clients to explore feelings and to elaborate on those feelings; (2) to allow clients freedom to explore in a variety of directions and to respond freely to what is going on; and (3) to encourage clients to be active in the process and to retain primary responsibility for the direction of

the counseling process.

- * Indirect Leading - The main purposes of indirect leading are to get clients started and to keep responsibility on them for keeping the interview going. One common use of this idea is to open an interview, for example, with: "What would you like to talk about?" "Perhaps we could start by your telling me where you're at now." "Please tell me why you are here." Clients recognize direct leads as invitations to tell their stories or elaborate on what has been said. This lead is encouraging to most clients, because they experience more responsibility for the relationship. To others it is threatening or annoying since they often expect the expert to be more active and to do most of the talking, advising, and questioning.

The following are guidelines for indirect leading:

1. Determine the purpose of the lead clearly.
2. Keep the lead general and deliberately vague.
3. Pause long enough for the clients to pick up the lead.

- * Direct leading is a method of focusing the topic more specifically. This method also encourages

clients to elaborate, clarify, or illustrate what they have been saying. Sometimes a strong element of suggestion is included. Some examples are: "Tell me more about your mother." The behavior of clients in response to a direct lead usually is to comply with the specifics of the lead, particularly if the counselor's attitude manifests interest to match his or her words. The main long-range consequence, however, is to enhance client awareness and later understanding, through more elaborate exploration of feelings.

The guidelines for direct leading are:

1. Determine the purpose of the lead.
2. Express the purpose in words that elicit specific elaboration.
3. Allow the client freedom to follow your lead.

* Focusing - the talk on a topic that the counselor thinks would be fruitful to explore is used when the client is rambling vaguely. Often in the early stages, clients will wander over numerous topics, sometimes in circular fashion. Occasionally, the counselor's indirect leads have encouraged this wandering, which, if allowed to continue for several minutes, tends to become confusing for both. When counselors think that their clients have explored

the main topics of their concern, then the counselors may stop the clients and ask them to focus on one aspect, since another purpose of focusing is to emphasize a single feeling or idea chosen from a vast array of possible intellectual verbiage. Focusing is also a way of aiding clients to get in touch with their feelings.

Some illustrations of focusing leads are: "Please elaborate more specifically on those feelings about your mother." "You have been discussing many topics the last few minutes; could you pick the most important one to you and tell me more about it?"

Focusing can sometimes be done by picking out one word or a short phrase from the client's talk and repeating it with a question mark or with emphasis. For example, after a client has been talking about how confusing her relationships with her supervisor have been, you might say, "Confusing?" The effect is, "Tell me more!" The one-word focusing method can be effective in keeping the client going. The counselor can say, for example, "and?" "Then, what?" or "But".

Focusing tends to reduce the client's confusion, diffusion, and vagueness. Again, the ultimate expected outcome is more meaningful verbalization

and, eventually, increased understanding. Another immediate outcome expected from leads focusing on feelings is that clients will talk more about their feeling experiences.

In summary, guidelines for focusing are:

1. Use your own feelings of confusion and sense of client direction as a guide to decide when to focus.
2. Be alert to feedback from client about priority of topics.
3. Assist the client to focus on feelings that may be hidden in the discussion.

* Questioning - Questions serve a variety of purposes in helping. Counselors use questions to ask people to expand on points, start conversations, obtain specific illustrations, check perceptions, and obtain information. They are used more frequently early in the helping process. As a general rule, questions should be used purposefully and sparingly, otherwise, they tend to become substitutes for making statements.

Some of the unpredictable effects of too many questions poorly phrased are that they:

1. Offend the client, who often feels interrogated.

2. Reduce personal responsibility for the helping process.
3. Increase client dependence on the counselor.
4. Encourage socially acceptable answers rather than honest responses.

Open questions avoid most of the problems cited above. An example of an open question is, "Could you explain more about your relationships with your parents?" not, "Do you get along well with your parents?"

The following list summarizes guidelines for questioning leads:

1. Ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered with "yes" or "no".
2. Ask questions that elicit feelings about what the client has just said rather than information.
3. Ask questions that lead to clarification for the client rather than information for the counselor.

3. Reflecting

Reflecting is one way of expressing to clients that we are in their frame of reference and that we affirm their deep concerns. There are three areas

of reflecting - feeling, experience, and content. From the counselor's viewpoint, the main purpose of using reflection is to understand client experience and to tell clients that we are trying to perceive the world as they do.

- * Reflecting Feelings - Reflecting feelings involves expressing in fresh words the client's essential feelings, stated or strongly implied. The purpose of reflecting feelings is to focus on feeling rather than on content, to bring vaguely expressed feelings into clearer awareness, and to assist the client to "own" his or her feelings. So often clients talk about their feelings as "it" or "them", as if feelings were not part of themselves. This is why we usually begin the reflecting method with "You feel" as an attempt to help him reown the feeling. You will know when your reflection is accurate because the client will tend to respond with something like, "Yeah, that's it."

Skillful use of reflecting depends on the counselor's ability to identify feelings and cues for feelings, from body cues as well as words. It is inappropriate, generally, to ask directly. Counselors must themselves experience feelings and be in touch with those feelings. Feelings are more subtle than emotions, such as anger, love, disgust,

fear, or aggression.

- * Reflecting Experience - This reflection is descriptive feedback that indicates broad observations of the counselor. It is done without editorializing. Reflecting experience goes beyond verbalized feelings in that the counselor also reads the implied feelings of nonverbal body language. The counselor notes, for example, rapidity of speech, heavy breathing, sighing, flushing, changing postures, and darting glances as cues to the client's feeling.
- * Reflecting Content - Reflecting content is repeating in fewer and fresher words the essential ideas of the client, and is like paraphrasing. It is used to clarify ideas that the client is expressing with difficulty. Clients lack vocabulary, for example, to express ideas simply and clearly, so reflecting content is a skill to give them words for expressing themselves. Sometimes it helps to repeat a client's statement, emphasizing a key word. In actual practice the three reflecting skills blend into one another.

A summary of guidelines for reflecting is as follows:

1. Read the total message - stated feelings, nonverbal body feelings, and content.

2. Select the best mix of content and feelings to fulfill the goals for understanding at this stage of the helping process.
3. Reflect the experience just perceived.
4. Wait for client's confirming or denying response to your reflection as a cue about what to do next.

4. Summarizing

Summarizing skills include attention to what the client says (content), how it is said (feelings), and the purpose, timing, and effect of the statements (process). Summarizing involves tying together into one statement several ideas and feelings at the end of a discussion unit or the end of an interview. It is much broader, therefore, than paraphrasing a basic message.

Summaries of an interview, or a series of contacts, may include a long paragraph, but the idea is to pick out the highlights and general themes of the content and feelings. Summaries of process include statements of where the helping process has been going and where it is now. The main purpose of summarizing is to give the client a feeling of movement in exploring ideas and feelings, as well as

awareness of progress in learning and problem solving. Summarizing also helps to finish an interview on a natural note, to clarify and focus a series of scattered ideas, and to clear the way for a new idea. It has the effect also of reassuring clients that you have been tuned in to their messages all along. For the counselor it serves as an effective check on the accuracy of perceiving the full spectrum of client messages. Summarizing the previous sessions at the beginning of an interview often provides needed continuity.

Guidelines for summarizing are:

1. Attend to the various themes and emotional overtones as clients speak.
2. Put together the key ideas and feelings into broad statements of their basic meanings.
3. Do not add new ideas to the summary.
4. Decide if it would be more helpful to state your summary or ask them to summarize the basic themes, agreements, or plans. In deciding, consider your purpose:

Was it to warm up clients at the beginning of the interview?

Was it to focus their scattered thoughts and feelings?

Was it to close discussion on this theme?
Was it to check your understanding of the interview progress?
Was it to encourage them to explore themes more completely
Was it to terminate the relationship with a progress summary?
Was it to assure them that their interviews were moving along well?

5. Confronting

The idea of confronting is to recognize honestly and directly and to point out to clients what is going on or what you infer is going on. The effects are challenge, exposure, or threat. Resulting emotional effects are sometimes anxiety when challenged with feedback from the counselor, and sometimes pleasure with his or her honest opinions and expressions of caring. In other words, confronting skills involve risk - resulting either in unwanted resistance from clients or in desired openness of communication. It is a "telling it like it is" method that may threaten or thrill, depending on the timing and readiness of the client to be confronted with feedback honestly offered. We will look at the subskills of the confronting skill cluster in more detail below.

- * Recognizing Feeling - It is very apparent that one's ability to recognize and respond to feelings to clients is based on the ability to recognize feelings in oneself. What do tenseness, sweating palms, twitching muscles, and fluttering eyelids say about one's own anxiety, guilt, anger, pleasure, or pain? Counselors must be aware of fine shades of feelings in themselves, which frequently are reactions to what the client is saying and can serve as guides to responses. For example, if counselors experience annoyance at what their clients are saying, they must decide whether the goals of the relationship would be enhanced or retarded by expressing those feelings.
- * Describing and Sharing Feeling - Sharing personal feelings about the client is a more intense form of self-disclosure than clarification responses. The principal value in describing feelings in oneself as a counselor is that such a description helps to clarify how the counselor feels. It also serves as a model for clients to recognize and express their feelings. Clients frequently do not understand the idea of expressing feeling, especially to near strangers - as counselors often appear to them initially. The condition of trust is dependent on

an open sharing of feelings. Again, counselors can accelerate the process of building trust by sharing their own feelings. This "sharing of experience," as described in Brammer, Shostrom, and Abrego (1988), is one of the best ways to model the idea of "being a person".

The values for clients of sharing feelings are considerable. They experience relief from tensions (sometimes called emotional catharsis), satisfaction that they had the courage to face the feelings, and release of new creative energies.

The limitations of free expression of feelings by clients (often called ventilation) are that they feel so good afterward that they consider it unnecessary to go on actively solving their problems. Sometimes, expression of feeling is a goal in itself to provide relief from suffering. Most clients have protective mechanisms for preventing them from revealing more feeling than they are able to tolerate, but counselors should be alert to occasions when client defenses are overwhelmed, and where their behaviors deteriorate under prolonged emotional catharsis.

Some guidelines for knowing how far to let clients ventilate and some cautions to observe follow. Be cautious about free expression of feeling if:

1. they are known to have severe emotional disorders - hysterical tendencies, delusional thinking, extreme anger, for example;
2. their lives are fraught with crises and emotionally demanding pressures such that discussing them mobilizes more feeling than they can handle;
3. their past history in dealing with emotional crises is known to be shaky;
4. strong resistance to exploration of feelings is noted;
5. the adequacy of your own experience as a Counselor of disturbed people is doubtful;
6. your own emotional life is in turmoil;
7. the time available for working through the feelings all the way is not adequate;
8. specialist support services are not available or adequate;
9. the policies of your agency are to discourage exploring the intense emotional life of clients;
10. the attitudes and expectations of parents or

guardians of young clients are not explored.
In summary, guidelines for describing and sharing feelings are:

1. Share your own feelings as a model.
 2. Ask clients to share their feelings.
 3. Be cautious about the depth and extent of sharing.
- * Feedback and Opinion - Feedback is a term borrowed from electronics and physics where information is fed back into a system so that corrections can be made. In counseling, we give the information in the form of opinions and reactions to clients. As a result, they have a better idea of how they are performing, and they can use the information, if they so wish, to change their behavior.

One of the most valuable confrontational skills for developing understanding is honest feedback to clients on how they affect you. We acquire our definitions of who we are by the reactions of other people to us. Our personalities are the total of our parents' opinions, chidings, and praises. Our helping relationships merely continue this basic process in a more focused fashion. Effective feedback from people they trust and know to care deeply

about them can assist clients to fill in gaps in their self-awareness. Reflect for a minute on a situation when you received feedback from another person. What were the factors that made it useful or not useful for you.

The main guidelines for giving feedback are:

1. Give opinions in the form of feedback only when clients are ready. This means that in most cases they will ask for feedback, but, if not, the counselor will ask if they would like some reactions. An example is, "We have been talking about your plans for the future; while you were listing your limitations I had some reactions." (Client's interest is aroused and the usual response is, "Oh? Tell me.") "Well, I'm convinced from what you have told me about yourself that you are vastly underestimating your capabilities here; from my observations I think you express yourself very clearly and concisely, for example."

Feedback may be in the form of critical commentary, also, as in the following illustration: "We have been talking about your problems in getting along with people. You may be interested to know that I have been feeling increasingly irritated with your persistent quibbling

about almost everything I say. I feel that I don't want to listen to you anymore. Do you think my reaction is typical of those of other people you know?"

Giving opinions without client's readiness to make use of them is only likely to arouse resistance, resentment toward the counselor, or outright denial since it would not fit the client's current self-opinion.

2. Describe the behavior before giving your reaction to it. Note in the illustrations about that the counselor described the specific instance and then gave his or her feeling about it. This description keeps the responsibility for opinions on yourself. Often it is difficult to determine when the feedback is a projection of your personal prejudices and problems and when it is the kind of reaction that the client would get from most people. Feedback must be given cautiously, and with the clear understanding that the counselor is offering his or her personal reactions to the client's behavior. Keeping reactions descriptive rather than evaluative leaves clients free to use them as they see fit. Emphasizing strengths is another starting point.

3. Give feedback in the form of opinions about the behavior rather than judgements about the person. It may seem like quibbling to separate the behavior from the person, but it is vastly different to say, "I don't like the way you constantly interrupt me," from "I don't like you because you are constantly interrupting me."
4. Give feedback about things that clients have the capacity to change. It is not helpful to give feedback about physical characteristics or life circumstances, for example, which they would find very difficult to change.
5. Feedback should be given in small amounts so that clients can experience the full impact of the counselor's reaction. Too many items may overload them and create confusion and possibly resentment. An example of such an overload would be, "I didn't like the way you spoke to me; I felt put down. Besides, you have been late consistently to our staff meetings and your progress reports have been getting skimpier, which has been irritating me even more." Feedback given in this cumulative manner serves more as ventilation of hostility for the giver

and less as a helpful gesture to the client.

6. Feedback should be a prompt response to current and specific behavior, not unfinished emotional business from the past. Being told, for example, that one is "too forceful" is not as helpful as saying, "Just as we were about to decide what to do, you pushed your idea and seemed not to hear the other suggestions. I was conflicted about whether to resist you or just give in."

7. Ask the client for reactions to your feedback. How do you react? Was it helpful or not? Did it enhance the relationship or diminish it?

The main attitudinal pitfalls in giving constructive feedback are:

1. A subtle demand for change.
2. A patronizing implication that "I'm doing this for your good".
3. A judgment about the goodness or badness of the person.

6. Interpreting

Interpreting is an active counselor process of explaining the meaning of events to clients so that they are able to see their problems in new ways.

The main goal is to teach clients to interpret events in their lives by themselves. In paraphrasing, the client's internal frame of reference is maintained, whereas through interpretation the counselor offers a new frame of reference. Interpretation is used more in formal psychotherapy than in simple styles of helping because of therapists' needs to think diagnostically. They must be formulating hunches all the time about what is going on and what might be a logical explanation for their clients' behaviors. They do not always share these thoughts, since they serve primarily to help them understand what is going on in their clients. Many counselors feel this kind of thinking hinders the counseling process because the counselor becomes preoccupied with thinking about or ahead of clients rather than with them. This shift to an external frame of reference in the counselor is one of the main limitations of using interpretive skills.

Interpreting is similar to reflecting, but interpreting adds the counselor's meaning to the client's basic message. When you decide that an interpretation might be helpful, look for the basic message of the client (as in reflecting and paraphrasing), restate it in capsule form, then add your understanding of what the client has said (the interpreting). If the interpretation makes sense to the

client, it will accelerate the interview. If the interpretation is not meaningful, try again. You must also be confident that your interpretation was essentially accurate, since it may take some time before its significance to the client sinks in. Interpreting means that you are leading clients to seek wider understandings of their feelings and broader perceptions.

Conclusion

People come to counselors mainly because they are unhappy about some aspect of their behavior. Although they do not always state their goal as wanting to change a specific behavior, they soon see that their actions must be the ultimate focus of their attention.

In general, dealing with people with problems calls for flexibility of response, rapid and active intervening with alternatives, and setting limited goals for getting the person functional. Although there are some special skills available for providing comfort, the personality of counselors is also an important consideration.

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