

**COUNSELLING COMMUNICATION SKILLS: ITS PLACE IN THE
TRAINING PROGRAMME OF A COUNSELLING
PSYCHOLOGIST.**

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Abstract

This article overviews three extremely important skills within the training of a counselling psychologist environment: active listening, use of questions and silences. It is now a well-established and widely accepted concept that counselling plays a central role in the development of an individual. Counselling is a specialist work. For it to be a success, the counsellor must employ certain skills during the counselling process. Within this context, the principles discussed below can be useful to improve all kinds of relationships - in all walks of life. Effective counselling can assist in resolving problems before they get out of control.

Key Words: Counselling, Communication skills, Nigeria, Guidance & Counselling, Training.

Introduction

Counselling is an interactive relationship that exists between the client(s) and the experts (counsellor). The Counsellor, by virtue of his/her training, has mastered some theories, laws or conceptual models that she can apply to the specific problems/issues presented by the client. Egbochuku (2002) defined counselling as a “face to face” situation in which a counsellor, by virtue of her training and skill, helps the client to face, perceive, clarify, solve and resolve his adjustment problems/issues. There is a legion of problems plaguing adults and adolescents in the society in the twenty first century, which need intervention of counselling experts. As a result, counsellors are now needed in other establishments apart from educational institutions. This implies that counsellor education programmes must be geared to equip beneficiaries with the knowledge and skills to meet these challenges. At times of emergency we often have a heightened response to another who is in need; both head and heart go into operative mode. In our concern for the person we examine the most effective way to help them find relief from their predicament and we are highly focused. At other times, especially when strong emotions are involved, we are often at a

loss about how to be of any help to the distressed person. Counselling is therefore aimed at helping the individual to solve his problems/issues armed with the appropriate skills. This implies that when the client participates in the counselling relationship, the counsellor provides information and reaction that make for effective coping of the client with his environment, thus making the client a happier person. Speaking, hearing, seeing, feeling and thinking are all ways in which counsellors and clients respond and communicate with each other in different counselling modes.

The counselling mode is referred to as the operational nature of the counselling process, which takes two forms: (1) individual counselling and (2) the group counselling. These modes are really counselling interviews, which are usually therapeutic in nature. There are basic skills which the professional makes use of to assist the client to use his/her inner resources to re-orientate himself to adjust positively to life. Counselling is a specialist work and for it to be a success, the counsellor must employ among others these skills discussed here during the counselling process. The skills are aimed at aiding the client in personal growth and development. Counselling interviews are therapeutic in nature and its success depends on the skills adopted by the counsellor. By identifying and developing/teaching simple skills we can enhance the counselling psychologists' ability to be more fully present for another person when they are distressed or experiencing difficulties in their lives. Three of these skills adopted by the counsellor in a counselling session, which are the main foci of this article, are treated below.

Some basic skills used in counselling.

Counsellors utilise different skills during counselling sessions. Among the basic skills that counsellor's use involves active listening (observing, attending and responding). Active listening requires full attention; alertness to every nuance, to what is both implicitly and openly said, thereby helping the client to clarify confused feelings and thoughts. The ground skills which help counsellors in active listening include: Empathy, awareness of body language, posture, tone of voice,

words and body language and the client's body language. Appropriate questioning (closed questions, open questions, multiple and frequent questions) and silence are two other basic skills which the counselling psychologist must be conversant with. Responding on an empathic level involves responding to content - to what is being verbally conveyed - and to feelings, by tentatively reflecting back your understanding of the feelings the client is expressing. These skills are well documented in Egbochuku Elizabeth's book on Guidance and Counselling : A comprehensive text. Some of these skills are outline in this article.

Active Listening

Sensitive, active listening is an important way to bring about personality changes in attitudes and the way we behave towards others and ourselves. Active listening is a communication skill that is fundamental for effective counselling relationship. When we listen, people tend to respond in a more democratic and less authoritarian way; more mature, become more open to experience and become less defensive. Okobia (1991) noted that listening forms the basis upon which other higher-level helping responses are built. She opined that active listening on the part of the counsellor conveys the impression that:

(i) He is genuinely interested in helping the client to solve his problem.

(ii) The client is unconditionally accepted, regarded, and valued.

If on the other hand, the counsellor is not able to listen and decode the client's problems, the counsellor will not be able to communicate her understanding of the client's problem (content) and how she feels about the problem (feeling) or is able to tell the impact of the problem on her client's psychological well-being. The ground skills which help counsellors in active listening include: Empathy, awareness of body language, posture, tone of voice, words and body language and the client's body language,

Empathy

Empathic responding is a vital part of active listening- hearing what the client says from the internal frame of reference and responding in such a way that the client knows and feels that the counsellor is striving to understand. Empathy has been described in a number of ways: e.g. walking in another's shoes, entering into another person's frame of reference, or having the ability to experience life as the other person does by temporarily entering into the client's world of thoughts, meaning and feelings. Empathy is an expression of the regard and respect the counsellor holds for the client's whose frame of reference (the inner world including aspects of self: values, thoughts, meanings' feelings, cultural influences, experiences and perceptions) may be different from that of the counsellor (Egbochuku 2002). It is however important that counsellors retain their own sense of self. The client needs to be 'therapeutically held' as well as understood. True empathic responding does so. To be held therapeutically means to feel that the counsellor is capable of accepting and supporting the client through anything she brings to the counselling setting. The counsellor is non-judgemental nor shocked and strong enough as not to need protection from what the client may have envisaged to be unacceptable or even hateful side/behaviour about him (Egbochuku, 2008). There are two levels of empathy the primary level and the advance level.

- The primary level empathy –this is when the counsellor responds to the facts and the expressed feelings of the client.
- Advanced empathy on the other hand deals with the implied facts and feelings of the client (Hanna, 2001).

Empathic responding circumnavigates all the other skills. The ability to empathize with another is enhanced by an ever-alert

attentiveness to facial expressions, body language, gestures and so on, and not only to what is being openly conveyed but also to the underlying implications. Intuition or 'hunches' have a part to play in empathic responding. On the subject of trusting his intuition - the feelings, words, impulses and fantasies that emerged when he was facilitating in group-work – Rogers (1961) wrote:

While a responsible business executive is speaking, I may suddenly have the fantasy of the small boy he is carrying around within himself - the small boy that he was, shy, inadequate, fearful - a child he endeavours to deny; of whom he is ashamed. And I am wishing that he would love and cherish this youngster. So I may voice this fantasy -not as something true, but as a fantasy in me. Often this brings a surprising depth of reaction and profound insights (p: 53).

Empathy not sympathy

Empathy is sometimes confused with sympathy. When we feel sympathy for someone we view them with pity: 'Poor Ngozi -she really can't cope now Chike has left her' Pity is often linked with victim-hood. While pity makes a victim of the sufferer, empathy empowers them; it says: 'I have a sense of your world - you do not stand alone, we will go through this together.' The other person becomes an important subject rather than a specimen object whose problems are far removed from us. We can tell we are objectifying someone when in our minds we slot them into a sociological category or stereotype like 'the lazy student, 'the single parent' or the adolescent 'delinquent'. These classifications stifle empathic understanding which relates to each individual and views their experiences as unique.

Awareness of body language

The individual's inner emotional state is communicated through our bodies. We give each other messages through body movement, the intonation of one's voice, facial expressions, posture, gestures and eye contact. Some of these movements may be slight or fleeting but in the heightened atmosphere of one-to-one counselling they are more often than not registered. Counsellors need to be aware of two sets of body language, our own and that of our client. As a helper our body needs to demonstrate behaviour that is facilitative. In psychological terminology, non-facilitative behaviour is called '**adverse stimulus**'. This occurs when we display an attitude that is off-putting to the client. Counsellors may display signs of non-attention; for example, looking bored, yawning, fidgeting or showing distractive behaviour. Another example of adverse stimulus is punitive attention -when the helper looks stern, perhaps tight lipped, raising their eyebrows or staring fixedly at the speaker. It is not difficult to appreciate how this type of response acts as a deterrent to accessing any material that the client senses the helper may disapprove of (Egbochuku, 2008).

Other mannerisms like picking at your fingers, shrugging or sniffing could be distracting to the client. This all seems so obvious and we may think we avoid all these, but it can be a revelation to watch ourselves in the act of counselling on video. What we think of as giving occasional assuring nods during a session may look exaggerated when we view ourselves on video, giving us a 'nodding dog' appearance.

Posture

Egbochuku (2008) opined that posture reveals the degree of interest we have in the client. When we sit back, away from the other, we display an attitude of distancing ourselves; and when we lean towards them we engage and show interest. Similarly, when we cross our arms and legs we convey the message that we are less

open to the other person. We are in some way protecting ourselves by closing off. In contrast, a relaxed and attentive posture tells the client that we are comfortable with ourselves and with them in the helping process. Although it would be unnatural to sit totally still throughout, too much shifting around can be distracting and fits into the category of 'fidgeting'.

As with everything in life, there are always exceptions to the rules and sometimes what seems a mistake often proves to be useful. I personally think it's good to learn the skills and also retain as much of ourselves as possible so that we respond in both a spontaneous and an appropriate way. An example is that if we find ourselves crossing our arms and legs during the session, rather than thinking 'Oh no, I shouldn't be doing this', it is more useful to observe yourself and note, 'I have my legs and arms crossed. I wonder why? Perhaps I am uncomfortable with what is being expressed, or it may be that in some way I am reflecting what my client is feeling.'

A counsellor working in the person-centred mode who finds herself yawning at times throughout a session, in the spirit of being genuine and congruent might say to a client something to the effect, 'I'm yawning again and I can see it's off-putting to you. I do feel a bit bored ... I don't want to be bored and it makes me uncomfortable that I'm yawning when you're talking to me. I think maybe I am reacting to what you're saying because you have repeated it many times.' Although Carl Rogers is perhaps more widely known for his 'unconditional positive regard' in the interest of being 'real' (genuine, congruent) with a client he would be direct and honest about his feelings and reactions towards the client.

The tone of voice

The tone of one's voice also acts as an indicator of the individual's thoughts and attitudes. If the counsellor speaks too quietly or hesitantly the other person may find it hard to have confidence in her as a helper. It would be counterproductive to be too forceful or overbearing in the way we interact. If, as counsellors, we talk clearly at a fairly steady level rather than sounding rushed or

excited, and without mumbling or stumbling over our words, then we are probably getting it right. Sometimes it is appropriate to mirror the tone of the client's voice to help them hear the emotion conveyed. Although humour can be useful at times, when used sparingly, it is not a good idea to adopt a jocular manner with your clients. It can inhibit their expression of deeper feelings. It is neither the counsellor nor the client's obligation to entertain or cheer up the other. In fact this approach would totally defeat the potential benefits of having counselling (Egbochuku, 2008).

Words

According to Egbochuku (2008), people use specific words to communicate inner emotions. It is more difficult to say to another, 'I completely lost control and I was destructive in my behaviour' than 'I was in a rage.' The word 'rage' says a lot more than 'angry'; the word 'joy' is more revealing than 'happy'; the word 'morose' more specific than 'sad' or 'depressed'; the word 'devastated' more emotionally packed than 'hurt' and so on. Here is a word of caution. Inevitably a counsellor may have at times a different understanding of a particular word or phrase from that of the client, so the counsellor should check that the understanding corresponds with the client's meaning. Clients whose culture or background differs from the counsellor may use a word in an unfamiliar way. In paraphrasing and summarizing the counsellor uses their own words to reflect back their understanding; the words which are used need to reflect accurately the client's meaning but they may put emphasis on a feeling, offering the client more insight. For example, a client might say 'I am very tired', and in paraphrasing the counsellor might say, 'You are exhausted'. This may lead the client to say 'Yes, I am exhausted - I really don't think I can go on like this', leading to a cathartic release of emotion.

Words and body language

Words can be either congruent or incongruent with what our body is demonstrating. For example, we may say 'I understand' while looking perplexed, or say 'No, that doesn't shock me' having raised our

eyebrows and crossed our arms and legs. What the body is doing is an indicator of deeper, sometimes unconscious feelings. A common display of incongruence is when a client says that they are angry while smiling, or that they are deeply sad with no emotion whatsoever. This tells us that the client is not comfortable in expressing their true emotions. What the client and counsellor hear is reinforced or contradicted by what they see demonstrated by the body language of the other (Egbochuku, 2008).

The client's body language

While we as counsellor need to be aware of our body language, it is also our work to decode, understand and interpret the body language of our client. What might their body language tell us? Body and facial expression can inform us about hidden feelings. For example:

- He is angry - his mouth is tensed. His eyes are narrowed and he is leaning back in his chair and is avoiding eye contact.
- He is very upset and near to tears - he has placed his hand up to his forehead and his mouth is twitching. He is leaning slightly forward and his head is down.
- He is eager to be understood - he is leaning towards me, with his feet placed firmly on the floor; he gesticulates freely with his hands, he is talking intently and his eyes are fixed on mine.

Use of Questions

Think about how you respond when others come to you for help, advice or general succour. Do you fire a lot of questions at them, questions like: 'What's wrong?' 'Why are you so upset?', 'Is it something she or he has said to you?' Asking questions may seem the most natural thing to do on these occasions, but questioning can be off-putting if overdone. Questions can be intrusive and too forceful, and may be used to satisfy our own curiosity, none of which is beneficial to the helping process. Yet questions used tentatively and

sensitively, are necessary for the exploration and clarification of facts and feelings.

In counselling, questions tend to be used sparingly because clients are generally encouraged to tackle issues at their own pace. During therapy painful material inevitably surfaces and insensitive questioning from the therapist is destructive to building trust. One of the tenets of therapy is the belief that people can self-heal, that people possess an innate ability to recognize what they need and, given the right set of circumstances, they can re-orientate themselves to what is meaningful in their lives. In other words, most of us do not want other people telling us what to do, nor do we want others delving nosily into our business. We do appreciate someone being with us in our troubles and listening attentively with sensitivity while we make sense of our situation.

Closed questions

When we ask a closed question, it is usually met with a closed response - that is, a response which does not allow any further exploration. Closed questions are useful for information gathering when we need to know specific facts or specific information; for example, in an intake session with a new client when a counsellor notes marriage status, number of children, medical details, work details and so on.

The answer to a closed question is often 'yes', 'no' or 'don't know'. The closed question begins: 'Do you', 'Can you', 'Have you', 'is it', 'would you say', 'Could it', 'Don't you think' and so on. The problem with questioning that invites a 'yes' or 'no' type of reply is that it can leave both parties facing a blank wall and lead to more questioning. While you are bombarding someone with questions, their feelings are subdued. In contrast, open questions allow further exploration of meanings, thoughts and feelings and encourage clients to impart additional material.

It is a good idea when using questions to ask yourself what the purpose is, and if it is assisting or hindering the helping process. It

may be information gathering when it would be more appropriate to wait, giving the client time to get in touch with feelings associated with what they are telling you. The excessive use of questioning by an inexperienced counsellor can be a ploy adopted to distance the counsellor from the client - for example, when the counsellor is uncomfortable with their own feelings with regard to what the client is expressing or with silences during the session.

Open questions

Open questions are valuable because they enable the expression of thoughts, feelings and personal meanings. They invite the other person to talk, to communicate and self-explore. They allow time to explore situations. Open questions begin with 'How', 'Where', 'When', 'What', 'In what way' and so forth. The answers given to them allow the counsellor to have a clearer understanding of the difficulties and thereby help the client to be more specific.

An example of an open question is: 'I'm not clear what you mean when you say that you feel easily hurt. Could you give me an example?' Clarifying non-direct questions can be useful; for example: 'Can you say a bit more about that?'; encouraging elaboration of points. This type of questioning also requires the client to be reflective. Open questions have no 'right' answer.

Multiple and frequent questions

Don't ask too many questions - be sparing. It is important to respect the client's right to privacy. Some issues may be delicate and too intimate to rush into. Allow time for trust to develop. The client, especially in the first few sessions when it is crucial to establish trust, may feel interrogated rather than supported. This will impede the building of rapport. The frequent use of questions does not allow time for the exploration of thoughts and feelings as and when they arise; therapy can then be experienced as confusing as the counsellor's interest appears to be initiated on a superficial level only. Beware of using multiple questions, with one question superseding

another in a string of enquiry. This can be experienced as annoying and distracting as well as confusing and gives little indication of the counsellor's competence. Ask one question at a time and listen with full attention to the response. When you come to practise your skills (e.g. in role play), use questions appropriately rather than bombarding the 'client' with one question after another. It helps to instil the habit of placing questioning in context with other skills at training level. Questions form a small part of skills use.

Questions to ask about your questions

- Are you trying to clear up a point? (clarifying).
- Are you gathering information?
- Does the question help your client to explore self and situation?
- Does the question have any therapeutic value - i.e. helping in some way?
- Are you avoiding anything by asking a question?
- You may be filling a space, trying to put a client whom you perceive as uncomfortable with silences at ease,
- or perhaps you as counsellor find it difficult to manage silences.

Asking too many questions can be an attempt to force change or to control the direction of the sessions; both can cause the client to deflect from issues rather than going into them. Let the client move at his/her own pace; the point after all is to lessen distress, not to add to it. There is a role for challenging when an experienced counsellor feels that the client will benefit from it, but a less experienced person with counselling skills would be advised to challenge extremely tentatively, respecting the other person's right to reach new perspectives in their own time.

Some general rules for questioning

- Use open questions when possible.

- Avoid closed questions which invite 'yes' or 'no' replies, except when requiring the client to be more precise or when (seeking specific information).
- Use indirect questions as a softer approach.
- Use questions sparingly.
- Be aware that some forms of questioning may suggest disapproval or criticism.
- Use one appropriate question at a time.
- Check the purpose of your question before you go ahead.
- Be aware of the tone of your voice, the speed of the question, how it is generally delivered and the message it may convey.

To recap, the purpose of a question is:

- To clarify - to help the client be more concrete and specific.
- To help identify problems and the factors which have created them?
- To gain useful information.
- To help the counsellor to have a clear understanding of the client's situation.
- To help the client get in touch with unexpressed emotions.
- To check reality - i.e. did I get that right? - Or specific meanings - e.g. 'You said ... I wonder what that means for you?'
- To explore underlying thoughts, feelings and meanings.
- To enable or encourage further insight into what has been expressed, leading to unexplored material.

Silence

Managing silence means having the ability to recognize a constructive silence. ***A golden rule while counselling is to use your ears and eyes more than your mouth!***

It may take the counsellor some time to feel comfortable with silences. Counsellors should ask themselves the following questions:

- How comfortable am I with silences?
- How often do I spend time by myself in silence?
- What associations do I have with silence?

Allowing silences gives the client space to reflect. The counsellor may experience awkwardness at handling a silence if she is a new counsellor but one's threshold of silence will increase with experience and you will be able to discern between different types. Sometimes clients are nervous, especially in the first or second session, and a protracted silence may be experienced as excruciatingly uncomfortable. In this case it would be advisable to acknowledge what you understand to be a rising discomfort on their behalf by saying something like 'I imagine it is difficult for you to be here.' This will serve two purposes. Firstly, it breaks an uncomfortable silence and, secondly, it is likely to lead to disclosure of feelings. Clients can get lost in their own thoughts and feelings or feel overawed by them, and a silence may then occur. A summary of what you have understood would be useful at such a time. Sometimes a silence begins because the client is hoping for something from the counsellor; this might be reassurance or confirmation that the counsellor has been listening, or has understood what has been said.

Emotions experienced during a silence - for example, feelings of awkwardness or anger - may help the client access material they are avoiding or are unaware of. Transferential material may come to the surface. The counsellor or helper may become a punitive parent whose mode of punishing is to distance themselves emotionally

from the 'offender' by means of silence. At a time like this the counsellor might say, 'I sense that you are feeling uncomfortable with this silence and I remember you saying that your mother used to get angry then refuse to speak to anyone in the family for days.' The client may make connections, realizing how deeply this has affected them, both in their childhood responses and in their adult reactions towards others who appear to 'switch off from them. Silences are more often than not constructive, even if a little awkward. A protracted silence often has an air of expectancy about it. My experience has been that silences lead to new ground. It would be a mistake to presume always to 'know' what a particular silence was about. Silence is another form of minimal response that allows the client time to think, feel and find expression '**Silence is golden**'.

Minimal responses

Minimal responses are made to demonstrate the counsellor's attentiveness and understanding of what is said and also to encourage the client to continue. Minimal encouragements convey interest. Minimal responses include:

- Mm, Uh-huh.
- Nodding.
- Using one word such as 'so', 'and', 'then'.
- Repeating one or a few key words the client has used.
- Restating the exact words of the client's statement apart from placing it in the second person, e.g. the client says: 'I feel so stupid', the counsellor says: 'You feel so stupid.' This is particularly useful when the comment is uttered as a throw-away line that may be covering a deeper hurt.

Conclusion

Three basic counselling skills that a counselling psychologist can use in a counselling environment were described in this article:

active listening, use of questions and silences. The nature and use of these three extremely important skills within the training of a counselling psychologist were highlighted. It is hoped that counselling psychologists and all help providers would have benefited from the points highlighted in this article.

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