HIGHGATE COUNSELLING CENTRE

CERTIFICATE IN COUNSELLING SKILLS

COUNSELLING MICROSKILLS

Counselling microskills are specific skills a counsellor can use to enhance their communication with clients. These skills enable a counsellor to effectively build a working alliance and engage clients in discussion that is both helpful and meaningful.

In this article, you will briefly consider five of these core skills of counselling which alone or together can help a client to access their deepest thoughts or clarify their future dreams.

Microskill 1: Attending behaviour

Attending is the behavioural aspect of building rapport. When a counsellor first meets with a client, they must indicate to the client that they are interested in listening to them and helping them. Through attending, the counsellor is able to encourage the client to talk and open up about their issues.

Eye contact is important and polite (in Western society) when speaking or listening to another person. This does not mean that the counsellor stares at the client, but maintains normal eye contact to show genuine interest in what the client is saying.

Geldard and Geldard (2001) suggest that to assist clients to relax, counsellors can include in their repertoire, the matching of non-verbal behaviour. This skill can take a little time to learn effectively, but it begins with the counsellor sitting in the same position as the client.

For example, if at first the client is sitting on the edge of her chair with her arms outstretched resting on her knees the counsellor can reflect or mirror this position.

As the client speaks more, the counsellor can either lean forward, to indicate empathy and understanding, or slowly slide back into the chair to take up a more relaxed sitting position. If the rapport has begun to be built between client and counsellor, the client is likely to follow suit. This will reduce the anxiety levels for the client.

Counselling consists mainly of listening and talking, but sometimes the use of silence can have profound effects on the client in the counselling session. When we first begin as counsellors, sometimes silence

can be awkward and we rush to fill the gaps, but as our experience grows, we become more comfortable with the concept of simply “being” with the client.

Microskill 2: Questioning

Questions during the counselling session can help to open up new areas for discussion. They can assist to pinpoint an issue and they can assist to clarify information that at first may seem ambiguous to the counsellor. Questions that invite clients to think or recall information can aid in a client's journey of self-exploration.

Counsellors should be knowledgeable about the different types of questioning techniques, including the appropriate use of them and likely results. It is also important to be aware and cautious of over-questioning. Asking too many questions sends a message to the client that the counsellor is in control and may even set up a situation in which the client feels the counsellor has all the answers.

In determining effective questioning techniques it is important to consider the nature of the client, their ongoing relationship with the counsellor and the issue/s at hand. There are two main types of questions used in counselling: (1) Open and (2) Closed.

Open questions: Open questions are those that cannot be answered in a few words, they encourage the client to speak and offer an opportunity for the counsellor to gather information about the client and their concerns.

Typically open questions begin with: what, why, how or could. For example:

- What has brought you here today?
- Why do you think that?
- How did you come to consider this?
- Could you tell me what brings you here today?

"How" questions tend to invite the client to talk about their feelings. "What" questions more often lead to the emergence of facts. "When" questions bring about information regarding timing of the problem, and this can include events and information preceding or following the event.

"Where" questions reveal the environment, situation or place that the event took place, and "Why" questions usually give the counsellor information regarding the reasons of the event or information leading up to the event.

It should be noted that care must be taken by the counsellor when asking "why" questions. Why question can provoke feelings of defensiveness in clients and may encourage clients to feels as though they need to justify themselves in some way.

Closed questions: Closed questions are questions that can be answered with a minimal response (often as little as "yes" or "no"). They can help the counsellor to focus the client or gain very specific information. Such questions begin with: is, are or do. For example:

- Is that your coat?
- Are you living alone?
- Do you enjoy your job?

While questioning techniques can be used positively to draw out and clarify issues relevant to the counselling session, there is also the very real danger of over-using questions or using questioning techniques that can have a negative impact on the session.

The wrong types of questioning techniques, at the wrong time, in the hands of an unskilled interviewer or counsellor, can cause unnecessary discomfort and confusion to the client.

Ivey & Ivey (2003) describe the following five problem questioning techniques:

1. *Bombardment/grilling:* This occurs when counsellors get caught into a pattern of asking too many questions one after the other. In doing this, the counsellor is always deciding which issue should be discussed next.
2. *Multiple questions*: This occurs when counsellors ask several questions at once. For example "Please tell me about yourself – how old are you, where were you born, do you have any children and what do you do for a living?"
3. *Questions as statements*: This occurs when counsellors use questions as a way to sell their own points of view. For example, "Don't you think it would be helpful if you studied more?" "What do you think of trying relaxation exercises instead of what you are doing now?"
4. *Questions and cultural differences*: This is where a counsellor needs to be aware of any cultural influences that may make asking questions inappropriate for clients from a specific culture. For example the rapid-fire North American questioning style is often received less favourably by other cultures.
5. *Why questions*: This is where the counsellor asks too many why questions. For example "Why did you do that?"

Microskill 3: Challenge

Generally speaking the term 'challenge' means challenging another person over a discrepancy or disagreement. However, challenging as a counselling skill is an attempt by the counsellor to gently bring about awareness in the client of something that they may have overlooked or avoided.

There are three steps to challenging in counselling. The first step involves the identification of mixed or incongruent messages (expressed through the client's words or non-verbals). The second step requires the counsellor to bring about awareness of these incongruities and assist the client to work through these. Finally, step three involves evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention evidenced by the client's change and growth.

During the counselling process there are four (4) discrepancies which the client could display. The discrepancy can be between:

1. Thoughts and feelings
2. Thoughts and actions
3. Feelings and actions or
4. A combination of thoughts, feelings and actions.

Having identified a discrepancy, the counsellor highlights this to the client, using a statement such as:

"On the one hand …, but on the other hand…."

This is a standard and useful format for the actual challenge. Of course, you may also use variations such as:

"You say … but you do …," or
"Your words say … but your actions say …."

E.g.: "Your words say you would like to spend more time with your sister, but your actions say that it's not a priority for you."

Microskill 4: Focusing

Ivey and Ivey (2003) have identified seven areas a counsellor can focus on in the counselling session to bring about broader perspectives and potential solutions.

The first is Individual focus, where the counsellor begins the counselling session by focusing totally on the personal aspects of the client; the demographics, history, and the reasons why counselling is sought, from the client. The counsellor will often use the client's name, to help bring about total focus on that client. For example, "Joan, tell me a little about yourself". "Joan, are you the oldest daughter in the family?"

The second is: Main theme or problems focus. Attention is given to the reason why the client sought counselling. Other focus, as no problem is truly isolated, the client will often speak of friends', colleagues, extended family members and other individuals that are somehow connected with the reason for the client seeking counselling.

Family focus, concerns siblings, parents, children. Flexibility is required in the definition of "Family", as it can have different meanings to different people, i.e. traditional, single parent, nuclear and/or can include extended family members, or very close friends who are given family titles such as Aunt or Uncle.

Mutuality focus is concerned with how the client reacts to the counsellor, because this could be an indication of how the client develops in relation to other people. It attempts to put the counsellor and client on an equal level, with the counsellor asking: "How can we work together?" "How would you like me to help with this situation at this point?"

Interviewer focus is where the counsellor may disclose information about themselves. Finally, Cultural/environmental/context focus. The counsellor will understand how a client is influenced by the community, in which they grew up, but this can be extended to other issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status to gain a greater understanding of the person the client is today.

Microskill 5: Reflection of Meaning

Reflection of meaning refers to the deeply held thoughts and meanings underlying life experiences. For the counsellor who uses reflection of meaning in their work, they will find that clients will search more deeply into the aspects of their own life experiences.

For example, imagine two individuals who take a holiday on an island resort: the same island, the same resort, the same time of year. One of them passionately expresses the wonders of the sunsets, walks along the beach and leisurely life style. While the other complains about the heat, sunburn and boredom they experienced.

This example illustrates how the same event can have a totally different meaning to the different individuals experiencing the event. Hence, the skill of reflection of meaning is to assist clients to explore their values and goals in life, by understanding the deeper aspects of their experiences.