Communicating with persons with disabilities: Active Listening & Empathy

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Presentation structure

• Communicating with PwD
• Communication: defining the field
• Communication skills
• Important counseling skills communicating with PwD:
  1. Active Listening
  2. Empathy
Communicating with PwD

General guidelines

• Speak to a PwD as to anyone else
• Rely on your common sense
• Use *person-first* language – Put the person before the disability
• Avoid labels
• Treat adults as adults
• Communicate clearly and comprehensibly
• Relax in your communication
1. Communication: what is?

- Two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange (encode-decode) information, news, ideas and feelings but also create and share meaning. In general, communication is a means of connecting people or places (Business Dictionary)
- Communication can be: 1. Verbal, 2. non-verbal
- Non-verbal communication may for up to 90% of the communication
..because one cannot be an effective counselor, mentor, coach or just fellow man, without being an effective communicator

..main counseling skills (and not only) are primarily communication skills:

1. Active listening
2. Empathy
3. Focusing
4. Reflecting feelings
5. Self-disclosure
Active listening implementation is demanding

I know you believe you understand what you think I said,
but I am not sure you realize that what you hear is not what I meant
Active LISTEN

ears to listen to

ten eyes to see
	a brain to think

full attention

a heart to feel
So, what is active listening (A.L.)?

Active, attentive, effective listening happens when one succeeds to listen to, decode and understand:

- **what** is said
- **why** it is said
- **how** it is said
- **what** is meant behind the words
- **what** is meant by the body language
A.L. sub-skills/techniques

A. Verbal

- Asking open-ended questions
- Paraphrasing
- Summarizing
- Reflecting feelings
- Brief verbal affirmations (e.g. I see, I know, sure, I understand)

B. Non verbal

- eye contact
- nodding
- leaning forward
- tone of voice
- facial expression
- gestures
(just some) **Barriers to A.L.**

- Forming a judgment or evaluation before understanding what is being said
- ‘jumping to conclusions’
- Hearing what we want to hear
- Downgrading a point of view that differs from our own
- Formulating and rehearsing our response
- Being inattentive - thinking about something else
**A.L. tips**

- Listen in a way that shows respect, interest and empathy
- Show the person you are listening by saying “okay” or “mmm”
- Use a calm tone of voice – not directive
- Listen to the content of what the person is saying – are there issues?
- Listen to how they are saying it – do they seem worried, angry, etc.?
- Allow the person to express her or his emotions (e.g. if she is crying, allow her time for this)
- Never judge a person or impose your own values
- Keep distractions to a minimum and try to find a private place to talk
- Do not do other tasks while talking to a person
- Do not interrupt the person
- Ask questions or gently probe if you need more information
- Use open-ended questions that cannot be answered with “yes” or “no” e.g. “Can you tell me a bit more about that?”
Persons with disabilities...

• ...evaluate A.L. as the most important of communication/counseling skills
• Poem: *Listen!*
When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving me advice, you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem, you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I asked was that you listen, not talk or do - just hear.

Advice is cheap; twenty cents will get you both Dear Abby and Billy Graham in the same newspaper.

And I can do for myself. I'm not helpless. May be discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.
But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I can quit trying to convince you and can get about this business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling.

And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I don't need advice. Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what's behind them.

Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes for some people - because God is mute, and He/She doesn't give advice or try to fix things.

"They" just listen and let you work it out for yourself. So please listen and just hear me.

And if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn - and I'll listen to you
A.L. “at a glance”

Video: Active listening skills
Empathy: What is?

To understand and share another person’s experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else’s feelings.

• Our social radar
• allowing yourself to become tuned into another person’s emotional experience
• Understand others’ situation, feelings, perspectives
• Recognize and respond to others needs
• Acknowledging and rewarding others
Showing empathy

Step 1: Create a safe and nurturing environment for the client. Be a calming presence

Step 2: Use encouraging behaviors to prompt the counseling client to share more information about his/her life circumstance

Step 3: Truly listen to the client’s words and observe non-verbal cues. Every single ounce of attention needs to be focused on the client
The three factors in the person-centered philosophical approach. Graphic by Tony McGregor
Empathy: what is not?

• Sympathy: feeling sorry for another’s hurt, pity
• Kindness: actions like being friendly, generous, considerate

Deviations from empathy:
• Identification
• Hypocritical empathy
• Avoiding empathy
Empathy vs. Sympathy

Video: Rene Brown on Empathy
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw&t=46s
Group Activity: Expression cards

• Form groups of two persons
• Each one chooses the photo of preference
• In pairs each member explains the reasons of choosing his/her photo and the feelings/associations caused (1 min./person)
• In plenary, each member tells what she/he has heard from his/her couple (1min/person)


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