

Counseling micro skills

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Counseling Microskills: Disclosure, Proxemics, and Eye Contact Wendy Dearing Walden University

In counseling, the use of micro-skills such as disclosure, proxemics, and eye contact helps to strengthen the therapeutic relationship, which in turn generates a more positive counseling outcome. These skills are used as non-verbal cues of communication, and develop a positive rapport within the counseling session. Disclosure, often termed 'self-disclosure' is when the counselor reveals personal information about him/herself that should have beneficial effects on the client. Proxemics is the science of how the "spatial features" in one's environment impact behaviors (Haase & Dimattia, 1970, p. 319). For instance, the seating arrangement and counselor's body posture will have effects on the client's ability to bond with the counselor. Lastly, eye contact is necessary to show that the counselor is actively listening, interested, and empathetic to the client. A good policy for counselors to adopt is the SOLER acronym (Knapp, 2007). The counselor should sit Straight facing the client, keep legs and arms Open, Lean forward towards the client, maintain Eye contact, and appear relaxed. Appropriate use of these skills in both individual and couples counseling will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Individual On an individual level, the counselor may have an easier time managing each of these micro-skills. Self-disclosure can be extremely helpful in developing a therapeutic bond; however, the counselor needs carefully consider that the disclosure is beneficial to the client's concern, rather than to the counselor (Nyman & Daugherty, 2001). They should always be honest and genuine (Knapp, 2007). A counselor should not make up a story because he wants to have a better rapport with the client. Disclosures should be used sparingly, and not be lengthy in order

to ensure that the focus remains on the client's journey. A self-disclosure that would help to build rapport could be something as simple as revealing a casual shared interest, such as the counselor revealing that he is also a Pittsburgh Steelers fan. Another example of an effective disclosure could be when a client expresses sadness due to her son moving out of the house. A counselor that has experienced the same "empty nest syndrome" in the past may want to self-disclose how difficult this was for her as well, and share a short narrative of how she found other outlets to decrease her sadness. Therefore, the counselor would be modeling coping skills to the client through self-disclosure, and could help the client explore her own outlets for coping. Seating arrangements are the start of the proxemics of the counseling environment. Sometimes cultural differences appear in clients' preferences for proximity in seating arrangements (Haase & Dimattia, 1970). A prior awareness of the client's culture, and an understanding of how their culture views personal space can be helpful in arranging seating. Many counselors' offices have enough seating for more than two people; therefore the counselor should offer the client his/her choice of seats. The counselor's chair should be facing the seating area, and adjusted so the counselor is facing the client (Knapp, 2007). Many other letters from the acronym SOLER come into play after the client has sat. The counselor should take care not to have arms or legs folded, but sit in an Open and Relaxed way that will appear inviting to the client. Posture is also an important aspect of proxemics. The counselor would not want to appear like he is ready to fall off of his chair, but he should angle himself toward the client, leaning closer during more intense or serious moments. For example,

when a client is relating a story to the counselor, and the counselor leans forward during an intense moment, it shows the client that the counselor is genuinely interested, and empathetic to the client's situation. Eye contact is used in counseling to show the client that the counselor is paying attention, and truly interested in what the client is saying. Maintaining eye contact sounds simple, but often can cause awkward moments if not done properly. Nobody wants a counseling session to feel like a staring contest. A counselor should maintain eye contact when the client is speaking, but also tend to other nonverbal clues the client may be sending through posture, hand motions, or facial expressions (Knapp, 2007). The counselor should also do the same while speaking to the client in order to perceive if the client truly understands what is being said. Couples Many of the same aspects of using micro-skills in individual counseling also apply to couples counseling. However, maintaining equilibrium between each of the clients can make perfecting these skills slightly more difficult. Self-disclosure especially can be difficult, because the counselor should not make any disclosures that appear like she is taking sides. An example of inappropriate disclosure would be if the client revealed that she is lonely when her husband is on the road, and the counselor disclosed that her husband travels also, and can relate to her feelings of loneliness. This may leave the husband feeling as though the counselor is on the wife's side, and damage the therapeutic relationship. On the other hand, the counselor could reveal to the couple that her husband also travels for his job, but that they focus on having quality time together rather than quantity time. This may help the clients realize that with mutual effort, and guidance from the counselor that they, too, could find more

quality time. Proxemics and eye contact also need to be dealt with carefully during a couples counseling session. The counselor should make sure that he is seated in a near equal distance from the couple. This can sometimes be difficult, so ensuring the seating logistics are acceptable ahead of time may be helpful. Through proper seating the counselor should be able to posture appropriately without showing favor towards one client or the other. The counselor should also maintain eye contact with whoever is speaking for the majority of the statements, but should utilize eye contact with the other client in the room occasionally during this time (Laureate Education Inc., 2010). While the counselor is speaking, she should try to keep eye contact with both clients. When directing a question or comment to only one of the clients, she should look directly at that client. The counselor must perform a juggling act of sorts, always maintaining some form of eye contact with each client throughout the session in order to look for nonverbal cues. If a client is speaking about how he works hard for a living, and he should be allowed to drink when he gets off of work, the counselor should be making eye contact with the husband, but also watching the wife's reaction. If the counselor notices that the wife is crying, he may want to break eye contact and look over to her as a nonverbal cue for the husband to notice how upset she is.

Conclusion The use of micro-skills is an art to the counseling profession. Many of these skills are used in everyday conversations, and communications. Effective use of disclosure, proxemics, and eye contact within the counseling session will greatly improve the therapeutic bond that is imperative to positive counseling outcome. References Haase, R. F., & DiMattia, D. J. (1970). Proxemic behavior: Counselor, administrator, and

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