

The importance of  
active listening and  
communication of  
empathy in the  
counsellin...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

There are many and varied skills used in a counselling environment and whilst all have equal relevance, I would like to focus on two skills which I feel are particularly important in the development of the counselling relationship. Active listening and the communication of empathy towards a client are individual skills which along with others help to form a basis for development at the onset of a therapeutic relationship.

Through the use of relevant literature and some personal observation, I will explore the fundamental requirement of each skill within the counselling relationship, looking at the reasons why I feel they are particularly important and the benefits that can be achieved by the client when these skills are used effectively. All skills used in a client/helper relationship form part of the contract between the two and must be demonstrated effectively and appropriately so they help to move the relationship forward and obtain the best possible results for the client. To do this the client needs to feel that they are the focus in the process.

An ordinary conversation between two people is normally an equal relationship which usually meets the needs of both parties. However, Nelson-Jones's (1995) opinion is that the client/ helper relationship is different in that the emphasis in counselling conversations is primarily to meet the client's needs. Active listening is, in my opinion, the starting point for any therapeutic relationship and forms the basis on which to build feelings of trust within the client. Active listening is in reality a combination of specific skills which show the client you are listening.

Giving the client your full attention, maintaining eye contact, using good body language and facial expression as well as considering the clients' non-verbal messages, all help to accurately gather information and understanding of what the client is trying to express. Nelson-Jones (1995) believes that ' Listening involves not only receiving sounds but as much as possible accurately understanding their meaning'. Body language and facial expression can reveal much about the client and supports the helper to uncover the ' unspoken' words in the story the client is trying to tell.

Unconscious negative signals from the helper such as fidgeting when someone is talking, indicates a lack of interest. Sitting calmly and conveying a sense of warmth and openness, help to put the client at ease, which in turn helps to build trust; extremely important for the relationship to continue and for clients to progress to experiencing and disclosing feelings. In my experience, a warm and genuine smile is an invitation to get to know someone a little more. Within our learning group I was initially drawn towards the people who immediately conveyed what I would describe as a warm personality.

In the first couple of weeks during role play, it was with these people I felt calmer and less embarrassed than with others, who initially had a slightly more reserved demeanour. In my experience, to smile at someone and to receive blank feedback is an unnerving feeling and immediately closes further communication. Once an initial connection has been made between client and helper, accurately understanding what the client is saying, both verbally and non-verbally provides the basis for a greater understanding of the clients motives, emotions and feelings.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-active-listening-and-communication-of-empathy-in-the-counselling-relationship/>

This process becomes a continuing cycle of awareness both within the client and the helper. Understanding the information correctly enables the helper to give an appropriate response. This is paramount to developing further the tentative beginnings of understanding in both the client and the helper. In my current learning environment, it has been the appropriate responses and positive feedback from my peers and my tutor which has enabled me to have a belief in myself and has motivated me to move forward and perhaps take a few risks.

Appropriate responses offer support and understanding. In a therapeutic setting, asking relevant questions, the use of pauses and silences to help the client think more deeply about what they are trying to say and the use of minimal responses show the client you are still listening but encourages them to continue. Listening carefully provides the basis for the cycle of understanding from the helper; listen, understand, evaluate, clarify, understand; which in turn focuses attention back to the client.

I feel that the real 'skill' behind the concept of active listening is the ability of the helper to draw together all the information available and effectively use it to provide an atmosphere of calm, warm, respectful acceptance where personal barriers and prejudices are put aside so that the client has a safe, supported space in which to experience their emotions. Nelson-Jones (1995) feels that 'Having their feelings sensitively listened to provides clients with the opportunity to experience and explore these feelings and so understand them better.' (p40) Another skill required in a client/helper relationship is the use of 'empathy'.

Nearly all the books I have read on counselling and counselling skills consider empathy as one of the most important requirements in the development of this relationship. It is considered by Carl Rogers to be one of the Core Conditions of any successful therapeutic relationship. Carl Rogers was an influential American psychologist born at the beginning of the 20th Century. He is widely regarded as the founder for the development and use of the Person Centred approach in the understanding of human relationships and wrote many books and papers on his theories and findings.

The Core Conditions outlined by Rogers include congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy. He believes that for any relationship to develop, the client needs to feel that the helper has a non-judgmental, accepting attitude towards the client and an understanding of what it is like to walk in their shoes. He believes that the best vantage point from which to understand someone's behaviour and motivation is from their point of view. Pete Sanders, (2002) states that in 1957 Carl Rogers outlined six conditions that he thought were necessary for therapeutic change in a client.

Two of the six were related to empathy which highlights the importance placed on this skill by Rogers. They were: That the helper experiences empathy That the client receives empathy, unconditional positive regard and genuineness of the helper Nelson-Jones's (1995) opinion is that ' An empathic attitude creates an emotional climate in which clients can assist their counsellors to understand them more accurately. ' (p38). He goes on to add that Rogers also feels that ' empathy is an attitude, a very special form of companionship, a gentle and sensitive way of being with clients.

However, to be truly effective within the client/ helper relationship the helper must maintain their own stance within the empathic response and to enter gently into the clients' inner world. To have an ability to enter the client's world without 'losing' yourself completely while fully comprehending the clients point of view. Nelson-Jones (1995) includes Roger's statement of empathy as 'To sense the clients' private world as if were your own but without ever losing the 'as if' quality - this is empathy...' (p99).

Milne (2007) describes it as retaining one's 'own sense of self'. (p36). It can have a negative effect on the relationship if the helper loses themselves in another's emotion. The helper must to maintain their own 'being' to be able to continue the support of the client. A sobbing helper cannot continue supporting the client effectively. As an example, in one role play session where I was the helper, I found myself becoming absorbed in the client's feelings because I had experienced similar feelings in my childhood.

I became so involved that I found it quite difficult to return to my role and form my next response. Reflecting on this later I discovered that it was also my personal liking for my client that helped lose me in their emotion. I put too much of myself into the situation and found it difficult to move on. The dictionary (1988) defines the word empathy as, 'The power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings'. I particularly like the word power in this definition as I feel that a truly empathic helper can bring about powerful reactions within the client.

I have personally been lucky enough to have been supported through my life by someone who always had a truly empathic understanding of my feelings

and emotions. When I needed support they always understood exactly how I was feeling and was always available when I needed help, unconditionally and with total focus, leaving me with clearer feelings and the strength to move forward. Personally I feel the genuine use of empathy is one of the skills at the very centre of understanding in the counselling process and I hope to draw upon my experiences to make sure I use my empathic understanding to truly identify with the client's perspective.

Only then will I feel I can presume to offer more. Hazel Johns (2007) believes that the 'power' should be seen as 'the capacity to effect change' rather than as in the traditional sense of the 'ability to control'. (p69). She goes on to say that when '... adequate support and empathic acceptance are present, challenge can be creative, purposeful and effective in helping people change or change the view of themselves or others'. (p128). In this particular instance she refers to counsellor training and the need for support within a group, however the same can be applied to the individual, both the client and the helper.

As an example, I recently voiced my very real concerns to a friend at work regarding assignments I need to complete shortly. When I look back now at the response she gave me I can only say that it was completely lacking in any empathic understanding. I was left feeling undervalued and that my emotions, which were genuine to me, were belittled and unimportant. The conversation became awkward and finished abruptly. In that moment I lost the power to move forward. The clients' reaction to experiencing empathy can be very powerful in bringing about change.

Nelson-Jones (1995) feels that when the client experiences the Core Conditions of Congruence, UPR and Empathy it has influence on their own core conditions, so helping to develop a climate for a less defensive attitude and a willingness to take risks when experiencing deep feelings. He goes on to explain that these conditions enable the client to have a greater empathic response towards themselves; that it produces a greater awareness within the client and therefore a greater understanding of their feelings and emotions.

The client then feels supported or 'held' so that they feel they can divulge any shocking, fearful and inappropriate feelings and be received in a non-judgemental way. He feels that 'Having their feelings sensitively listened to provides clients with the opportunity to experience and explore these feelings and so understand them better.' (p40). The dictionary (1988) explains the word 'skill' as a 'special ability... acquired by training'. A person becomes 'skilled' when they can demonstrate accomplishment.

In a therapeutic relationship an accomplished use of active listening and empathy, used alongside other skills can, from the evidence gathered, produce an environment in which the client can change and grow. There is a general belief that this can only happen when the correct conditions for change are available to produce that environment. Nelson-Jones (1995) feels that the importance of these skills is so great that 'Counsellors who insufficiently possess these attitudinal conditions may increase their clients' incongruence, negative self-regard and lack of empathy to themselves and others.



. He goes on to say that Rogers also believes that, ' it is the quality of the interpersonal encounter with the client which is the most significant element in determining effectiveness'. The skills discussed here, along with others, form a complex and symbiotic relationship which helps support the client through the therapeutic process. Used on their own they have limited benefits but used together along with a high quality of understanding they can create a positive environment in which the client can develop.

Rogers' (1986) studies helped him understand that every person has an ability within himself/herself for change and, ' vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes and self-directed behaviour and that these resources can be tapped only if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided' (p. 197). He accumulated much evidence in his career which showed that his theories did indeed help the client to become a more rounded individual.

He says that evidence shows ' that individuals who live in such a relationship even for a relatively limited number of hours show profound and significant changes in personality, attitudes and behaviour... ' It is that statement which I feel emphasises the importance of the two skills I have chosen to highlight within a client/ helper relationship. They are of course extremely important as the foundation for the process of understanding to begin but also for developing and maintaining that process and to help the client towards change .