Annexure 10: Listening to the Client’s Story

Source: Kustner, 2011

Listening

Listening is integral in building trust in the counselling relationship and gives the client space to open up. It also prepares the client and counsellor to reach a level where it is emotionally safe in the relationship to help the client explore options and make a plan. We listen for and observe.

- Our own feelings – self-awareness;
- The client’s experiences – what happened to them (content);
- The client’s behaviour – what they did or didn’t do (non-verbal);
- The client’s feelings – that arise in relation to their experiences and behaviour; and
- The client’s mood, appearance and speech patterns.

We show the client we are listening to them by monitoring our own non-verbal behaviour in counselling.

Attending

Attending means being physically, intellectually and emotionally ‘present’ in a counselling session. These skills indicate to the client that the counsellor is listening, is aware and is ready to interact. They show in a non-verbal way that the counsellor is attentive and available. The acronym SOLER MAP is often used to summarise basic skills.
- S – stands for sitting squarely: this means facing the client so that they can see the counsellor and communicate openly. Sometimes a more ‘conversational’ sitting style is used where the counsellor and the client sit at right angles to each other while they talk.

- O – stands for open posture: this means not crossing arms or holding a folder/file in such a way that it indicates a closed body, and possibly a closed or ‘switched off’ mind. It can also refer to being careful not to have, or minimising, barriers between counsellor and client, such as a desk or bed.

- L – stands for leaning forward: this means leaning in towards the client at appropriate times to convey interest and concern. This should be used carefully so as not to intimidate a client too soon in an encounter. In addition, counsellors must be mindful of body space differences in people from different backgrounds. Good observational skills will soon pick up what is an appropriate space.

- E – stands for eye contact: this means keeping natural eye contact to show the client that the counsellor is listening to what is being said. Remember that for some people, too much eye contact may be experienced as threatening or disrespectful; good contextual knowledge will assist here.

- R – stands for relaxed posture: this means not fidgeting excessively or holding one’s body in a tense manner. It also does not mean adopting a slouched position. The counsellor should convey a calm sense of containment to the client and should be aware of excessive gesticulating, body movements, tapping feet, clicking pen, playing with hair, fiddling, etc.

- M – stands for minimal encouragers: these encourage the client to keep talking and show one is listening. These encouragers, such as ‘mmm, uh huh, I see’ could go along with nods of the head.

- A – stands for attentive silence: we are often tempted to interrupt a client to ask a question, make an observation, or to get clarity on a particular point. While these are not bad things to do, we should generally wait for an appropriate pause in the conversation to make a verbal response. If the client is talking easily then it is better to maintain an attentive silence which conveys interest and respect.

- P – stands for presentation: how does the client present themselves and how should the counsellor present themselves. Aspects to look out for include the following.
  - What is the client’s general mood: is she/he positive and upbeat, pessimistic and depressed, angry and confused, defensive and wary?
  - What kind of body language is the client using? The ideas expressed in SOLER (above) are useful to think about – is the client open, does the client use appropriate eye contact and physical distance, is the client tense and withdrawn?
  - Is the client neat and appropriate in dress and physical presentation? It is not the role of the counsellor to judge the client’s fashion sense or pass moral judgment on an outfit – rather the counsellor is assessing the client’s general mood and wellbeing. A depressed person may often neglect their personal appearance and this can be an important warning sign.
  - How does the client use language? Rate of speech, tone of speech and volume of speech can affect how we understand the client and can also suggest mood and mental state.
  - The counsellor should also be appropriately dressed in attire which is suitable for his or her profession and the context in which the counselling takes place. The counsellor should be neat and tidy and convey an attitude of professionalism.
The counsellor should develop an awareness of how she or he uses language and attempt to modify vocal skills to improve comprehension and communication. Awareness of vocal style can be gained through taping of one’s voice and reviewing for clarity or by asking for feedback from others, including the client. The kinds of things to look out for include the following.

- **Tone of speech and volume of voice**: the tone can convey warmth and empathy or indicate a desire to bring formality into a particular encounter.
- **Rate of speech**: in general one should use a slower rate with a client unfamiliar with one’s accent – but this should not become sing-song or patronising.
- **Range of inflections**: stressing certain words and varying emphasis will prevent boredom.
- **Modifying accent/ pronunciation**: it may be useful in some settings to adapt pronunciation of certain words to accommodate local style and usage, in order to improve comprehension.
- **Rhythm of speech**: the counsellor should try to modify their rhythm of speech to be clear and interesting.
- **Appropriate words and language**: the counsellor needs to understand the particular context in which the counselling is being given, and to choose those words and phrases that clients also use and understand.