Annexure 11: Helping the Client Explore Their Story

Source: Kustner, 2011

Reflection

When somebody takes the time to tell us their story, it is important that we respond in a way which respects what they have said and shows them we have grasped what they are trying to say.

Reflecting skills are those skills which allow the counsellor to respond directly to what a client has said to take the conversation further in a useful direction. They also show the counsellor has been listening or, if the response misses the mark, gives permission to the client to put the counsellor back on track.

It is always important to begin a response with a qualifier such as ‘It seems to me …’ or ‘It appears that …’ and to use a tone of voice which conveys tentativeness. This is not because the counsellor wishes to appear uncertain but to show respect for the client’s right to be the final judge of the ‘truth’ of their utterances, thoughts and feelings.

Key Reflecting Responses

Each technique will be illustrated using the following client statement: ‘So now my partner has left, and I’m alone to deal with the big house and all the chores. He helped me a lot. I don’t know if I’m going to cope now.’

Reflection of Content (Paraphrasing)

The facts of what the client is saying are reflected using a technique called paraphrasing. Paraphrases are short, clear response in which counsellor states the essential points of the client’s statements in the counsellor’s own words. Paraphrasing is not the same as simply repeating word for word what the client has said, but rather the counsellor uses
his/her own words to restate the main points of the client's statements.

An example:

’So you’re saying that now that your partner has gone, you’ll have to take on more tasks, and you’re not sure you can manage.’

**Reflection of Feeling**

By accurately reflecting the feeling which a person is experiencing we provide a deeper understanding of how an event has affected the person and connect with the client at an emotional level, which can build trust and enhance rapport. Reflecting feelings accurately takes some practice.

In English, there are many ‘feeling words’ of various intensities, e.g. cross, angry, furious. Other South African languages, such as Sotho and Zulu, do not have many words to describe feeling states, and thus it takes a special skill to show that you understand what the client is feeling. Using metaphors can be useful in these instances e.g. ‘Your heart feels sore’ instead of ‘You feel depressed’.

An example:

‘It sounds like you’re feeling worried and overwhelmed.’ (With this response, we are still in the client’s frame of reference, and the client stays focused on his/her feelings and experience).

If the counsellor is not quite sure what the client is feeling, she or he can ask the client a feeling question: for instance, ‘How does it feel now that you’ve had to take on all of this on your own?’

Note that empathy is more quickly achieved if the right feeling can be identified and reflected by the counsellor, rather than it being elicited by a question.

**Reflection of Meaning**

Reflection of deeper empathy (sometimes called reflection of meaning) is achieved through linking the feeling to the content. Many counselling manuals and courses suggest that counsellors use the ‘you feel (the feeling, e.g. sad) because (the reason, e.g. your relationship broke down)…’ formula to reflect a combination of feeling and content. If used incorrectly and in a formulaic way this can immobilize the client and changes the client from being in a ‘feeling mode’ to a ‘thinking mode’, i.e. instead of feeling understood, the client is trying to work out whether the counsellor has got it right.

If used well, linking feeling to content can enhance empathy because it starts to bring depth, meaning and texture to the counselling encounter. By associating the feeling with a situation or an event the counsellor is helping to tie up the threads of the conversation and to help the client see why, in a certain situation, they responded in a certain way.

Sometimes if the client has already identified a particular feeling, the counsellor can expand and explore that feeling by asking the client to say more about the feeling or to describe its impact. The counsellor can also simply repeat the feeling word in a tentative and a questioning way, encouraging the client to go deeper and further.

An example:

‘If I’ve heard correctly, you’re saying that you feel scared and overwhelmed, because it seems as if your partner has left you to cope on your own.’

‘So your partner’s departure has raised a lot of feelings in you; perhaps anxiety, fear, anger…’

Both these responses allow the client to confirm or disconfirm what the counsellor is saying.
Reflection of Process

Sometimes we reflect the client’s feelings related to counselling itself or towards the counsellor. This is called reflection of process (or immediacy).

An example:

‘You feel embarrassed talking to me about personal things,’ or ‘When you said your partner had left you I noticed tears came into your eyes – this feels very sad for you.’

Immediacy skills can reflect on the relationship between the counsellor and client (or the ‘process’ of what is happening between them). If, for example, the counsellor asks the client a question about her relationship with her partner (‘How are things between you and your partner?’) and the client becomes very angry, the counsellor may need to address the client’s response as soon as possible.

The counsellor could respond in a number of different ways:

‘Susan, I noticed you got angry or anxious when I asked you about your partner. What was going on for you in that moment?’

‘Susan, that seemed to be an awkward moment between you and me there. Perhaps we should talk about it?’

‘Susan, it seemed you got very angry or anxious then. Could you tell me what angered you or made you anxious?’

Susan’s angry response might have been because she felt humiliated about her troubled relationship or felt put in a spot by the counsellor too early in the counselling session. She could have sensed a pattern of challenging questions from the counsellor, or she could have been defensive because a previous counsellor had been quite judgemental about her partner.

Only by using the skill of immediacy will the counsellor get to the root of the issue and allow the air to be cleared. Once the issue is out in the open it can be addressed and the relationship between the counsellor and client put back on an amicable and workable footing.

Meta-communication (communicating about a communication) is also a reflection of process.

An example:

‘Your voice seems to get much lower when you talk about your sister...’

Reflection of a process is an advanced skill only to be used by an experienced counsellor and always after a good, trusting relationship has been developed.

Reflection Tips

- When a reflection is accurate the client feels encouraged to continue speaking and to share more personal information. Here are some tips to help you reflect feelings.
- Listen to words and metaphors the client uses as clues to feelings, e.g. (client) ‘Everything seemed to happen at once’ – (counsellor) ‘You felt overwhelmed.’
- Observe the person’s non-verbal language, such as facial expressions, body movements, posture and gestures, e.g. tight fists could mean anger.
- Ask yourself how you might have felt if you experienced what the client describes (remember though, that people may react differently to events).
- If all else fails, ask the client how he/she feels (don’t ask too often!)
Paraphrasing
A paraphrase is a brief, tentative, statement which reflects the essence of what the person has just said. A good paraphrase:

- Captures the essence of what the person said. It leaves out the details;
- Conveys the same meaning, but uses different words;
- Is brief. Your paraphrase should be shorter than what the person just said;
- Is clear and concise. Your paraphrase should help clarify things, not confuse them; and
- Is tentative. We want the client to feel comfortable with disagreeing with or correcting the paraphrase.

We use a paraphrase:

- To check perceptions: do you understand what the person has said? When you paraphrase what you think the person has said, they can react to your paraphrase and tell you whether it is accurate or inaccurate. Be sure your paraphrases are tentative enough so that the client will feel comfortable correcting you if you’re wrong;
- To clarify what the person has said: hearing an accurate paraphrase of what they have just said helps the client to clarify for themselves what they are thinking and feeling. Often a paraphrase will bring up new thoughts and feelings, acting as a prompt to further discussion. A good paraphrase may lead to interesting new explorations because it gives the client an opportunity to reorder their thoughts; and
- To give accurate empathy: an accurate paraphrase demonstrates to the person that you are listening, and that you understand. In effect, a good paraphrase says, ‘I’m with you.’ Some standard openings are: ‘Let me see if I’ve got it right’; ‘Sounds like...’; ‘I think I hear you saying...’; and ‘So, in other words...’

Clarifying
Clarifying is a way of getting more information about something the client has said by asking them to make clearer what they have just said. As noted above, the simple act of paraphrasing what the client has said may bring clarity because in their response to the paraphrase they will automatically expand on their words and ideas. Sometimes, however, you are not sure what they mean by something and it is necessary to ask a question and to probe.

You can clarify what is not clear through asking questions for greater understanding or repeating client statements with a questioning inflection. For example if a client says: ‘I always take my heart pills because of the children,’ the counsellor could respond in at least two ways:

- By asking a clarifying question such as ‘When you said because of the children what did you mean?’; or
- By saying ‘because of the children?’ with a rising inflection to indicate a question.
- Both methods prompt the client to expand further on the particular point and clarify for the counsellor what is meant. It is important that the counsellor comes across as genuinely interested in greater clarity, rather than curious and voyeuristic. It is helpful to present oneself as tentative, interested and intent on building a comprehensive picture of the client, their story, their needs and challenges.
It can be also helpful for the counsellor to position herself or himself as a ‘naive’
listener, keen to get to the heart of what the client is saying but assuming
nothing. If the client really believes they are the experts on their own lives, they
will be willing to tell you more about them so that you truly understand where
they are coming from.

Exploring through Questioning

Asking questions in counselling is useful but should be kept minimum. Almost every
beginner counsellor tends to overuse questions. The following tips are useful to
remember when using this skill in counselling.

- Questions should serve a purpose – either clarifying or helping the client to think
about the problem in a different way. Before asking a question, ask yourself:
  ‘Whose need is it for me to ask this question?’
- Clients might expect counselling to be conducted on a question-answer basis,
because that is what a doctor or traditional healer consultation is like. After
asking a question, use other counselling skills, like reflection of feelings and
summarising to demonstrate that counselling is not primarily about asking and
answering questions.
- Ask open-ended questions rather than closed questions. Continually asking
  closed questions has an immobilising impact in communication in counselling.
  Counselling should not feel like a talk show or interrogation session. An open-
  ended question has many potential answers, a closed one has only one or two
  possible answers.
- Asking hypothetical questions. These are usually open questions which prompt
  lateral thinking in clients. An example to a client could be ‘What will you do if your
  husband agrees to go to couple counselling?’
- Asking reflecting questions. These are questions which encourage clients to
  summarise or reflect on a particular discussion. This could be very effective in a
  session where a number of issues have come up. For example, the counsellor
  asks: ‘What, for you, are the main reasons why you and your partner don’t
  communicate well?’
- Asking evaluative questions. These are questions which take a specific issue and
  ‘evaluate’ a course of action. For example if a client wants to resign and start a
  small business from home the counsellor could ask: ‘How do you think this will
  work over the next six months?’

Some Pitfalls of Questioning

- Leading questions: This type of question presumes that the questioner knows
  the answer, and puts words in the other person’s mouth. (‘That’s hard for you,
  isn’t it?’ ‘When will you tell your parents?’)
- Why questions: They can make people defensive, as they can imply that the
  person should know the answers. Such questions can sound critical, as though
  you are questioning their judgement. (‘Why isn’t this working for you?’ ‘Why do
  you not understand this?’)
- Intimate questions: Some questions are not appropriate to ask because they
  may not be relevant or may be too personal. Always try to ask questions that are
  valuable for advancing a specific conversation. Always be respectful and treat
  other people as you would want to be treated. Questions asked out of curiosity
  should be avoided. (‘Are you gay?’ ‘And then what did you do in bed?’)
- Poorly-timed questions. Questions that are poorly-timed interrupt the flow of a
  person relating their story. ‘How long has this been going on for?’—asked in the
midst of someone revealing that he is cheating on his girlfriend. ‘Well, what will you do?’ —asked while someone is still relating the details of her personal crisis.

**Summarising**

Summaries are essentially a series of paraphrases of issues from a client. A summary provides order and focus and sorts out relevant material to explore in an encounter. Good summaries act as natural ‘stopping and reflecting’ points in a conversation and can also be used to start sessions and bring them to a close. To effectively summarise, the counsellor has to really listen and attend to what the client is saying and how they are saying it.

**Other uses of summaries include:**
- Giving direction to a counselling session;
- Preventing from getting stuck on a particular issue;
- Checking out if the counsellor has really understood what the client is trying to say;
- Linking different points and themes together;
- Helping the client gain some perspective of his/her situation;
- Helping the client see where they’ve been and where they are going; and
- Helping the client to identify possible areas to be explored further.

**Some tips for summarising**
- A good summary is brief and includes not only the facts and the words but also the feelings the client has expressed.
- Put the ideas and descriptions at least partly into your own words but the language should still be primarily in the words used by the client.

**When to use a summary**
- It is a good way to begin or end the session.
- It is a useful skill at a point where a person appears to be stuck.
- It is helpful at the point where the person has spoken for a long time in a confusing or rambling way.
- It is useful when shifting modes, i.e. after you have explored and defined the problem, it is useful to summarise and then move on to exploring options.