
Active Listening and Empathy

INTRODUCTION

Listening

Listening refers to the ability of helpers to capture and understand the messages clients communicate, whether these messages are transmitted verbally or nonverbally, clearly or vaguely. Listening is a complex and fascinating skill. Understanding that inadequate listening skills do exist is a starting point for this subject. People can, as you know, listen with more than their ears. Counsellors and other communication experts listen with the majority, if not all, of their senses—hearing, sight, touch, sometimes smell, and often with intuition. No matter which of the senses they use, it's vital that counsellors listen actively to their clients.

Empathy

There are two ways to look at empathy:

- As a communication process or skill
- As a way of being

Sharing empathy as a communication process or skill means listening to clients, understanding them and their concerns (to the degree that this is possible), and communicating this understanding to them. The purpose is to enable them

to understand themselves better and to act on their own understanding. In this unit, you'll look at the basic skills of sharing empathy.

LISTENING

Messages

When the helper is listening to clients, the clients aren't looking for the helper to repeat their words. They want more than physical presence in human communication. Clients expect the helper to be present psychologically, socially, and emotionally. In other words, active involvement through listening is both desirable and necessary. Helpers should listen to clients' verbal descriptions of their experiences and behaviors as well as their nonverbal cues and messages. Clients send messages through their nonverbal behavior. As a helper, you need to be able to read these messages without distorting or overinterpreting them.

As a helper, your job is to help your clients achieve *clarity*. This means they understand their situation in terms of specific experiences, behaviors, and feelings and emotions.

When people are together, the atmosphere can be filled with messages—bodily motions, facial expressions, voice quality, and physiological responses—all of which communicate more than words. Nonverbal behavior can punctuate or modify interpersonal communication. Helpers should learn to read these nonverbal messages.

Paraphrasing and Reflecting Feelings

In *Basic Counselling Skills: A Helper's Manual*, Nelson-Jones shows that *paraphrasing* is an important part of active listening. When a helper paraphrases—restates the gist of what the client has said—the client knows that his or her ideas are being received and understood. Excellent paraphrases are clearer and more succinct than the original statements.

Activity 1

Allan Pease, a body language expert, strongly suggests the following to finely tune your understanding of nonverbal behavior. For ten minutes a day over a two-week period, watch any television show without sound. Soap operas, game shows, and talk shows are particularly good subjects here. Make notes as you watch, and answer the following questions:

1. What gestures are associated with excitement?
2. What gestures imply discomfort or avoidance?
3. How do people show they're particularly interested or uninterested in what someone else is saying?
4. How does someone convey a posture of authority, dominance, or challenge?

There are no correct or incorrect answers here, because results vary with specific programs and individual perceptions.

A specialized form of paraphrasing, *reflecting feelings*, emphasizes the emotional aspects of what the client has communicated. The two steps for reflecting are

1. Identifying the feelings
2. Reflecting those feelings back

Questions

Another helpful skill that you'll want to master is the use of *open-ended questions*. This type of question requires a lengthier response than *closed-ended questions*, which can be answered with yes or no. If you find your clients responding with short, terse answers to your prompts, you should make sure that you're asking open-ended questions that give the clients much more leeway in responding.

Listening in its deepest sense means listening to clients themselves as influenced by the contexts in which they live, move, and have their being. Clients' visions of and feelings about themselves, others, and the world are real and need to be understood. Perceptions people have of themselves and their worlds are often distorted. Helpers shouldn't challenge clients as soon as they hear any kind of distortion—they should note the gaps and distortions and challenge the client when it's appropriate to do so.



Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Nelson-Jones listed six ways of identifying feelings. How many of them can you remember and list below?

Check your answers with those in the back of this book.
