

ACTIVITY 3.4.1



Conversational skills are key to a consistently successful counselling. There is lots of literature on that specific topic, including but not limited to freely available information on the internet. Cure your curiosity and get information on what to keep in mind regarding modes of communication in counselling interviews.

On the basis of your research, summarize the aspects you think are most important and try to list the do's and don'ts of communication on counselling sessions.



Consulting attitude and dialogue control:

Consulting attitude:

„Only in an appreciative environment, one can develop positively“, is one of the key assumptions of the client oriented communication in accordance with the teachings of Carl Rogers.

It is important not to talk and explain too much and instead listen and observe carefully. That gives counsellors the chance to get the most accurate view possible of the client. Especially “Active Listening” shows the dialogue partner that you take his or her arguments and perspectives serious and accept his or her fears, needs and positions. However, that doesn’t necessarily mean to agree with the client’s opinions! For example, you could phrase your concerns like that: “I understand deeply that you [...]. However, the current situation on the labour market requires that [...].“

Empathy, interest and appreciation are crucial when it comes to motivate people to cooperate. These are reflected in body language, eye contact and intonation as well as in wordings, phrasings and modes of communication. When clients get the feeling they aren’t taken serious or their fears and wishes are seen as “wrong” or “problematic”, they aren’t prone to open up and cooperate. Whenever possible, counsellors should choose positive formulations that empower and motivate people seeking advice. The client’s strengths and accomplishments – such as social competencies, job experience, and research regarding possible employers, well-designed application documents, good communicational skills or a thoughtful reflection on one’s possibilities on the labour market – should be focused on and stressed. Also, expressing empathy and understanding facilitates the establishment of a fruitful relationship. They should be voiced explicitly in the course of the counselling interview (“I can easily understand that





[...]”, “I can imagine that [...]”). In addition to that, posing questions is a simple way of showing that you are sincerely interested in the client’s situation and that you seek to understand his or her emotional reactions.

Speed of counselling:

How fast the counselling process proceeds must be individually adjusted to the particular client and/or is determined by him or her.

Gender sensitivity and gender-sensitive language:

One’s sex, gender and perceptions of what it means to be „male“ or „female“ can have crucial influence on the counselling process. Our ability to reflect on gender stereotypes, on their effects on work, life and counselling and on our partiality therefore is crucial. If we are aware of those aspects and communicate them professionally, new avenues and possibilities can open up for the client. To do so, it is key to keep your language simple and easily understandable while always gender-sensitive.

Posing questions:

The dialogue should primarily be structured by the counsellor’s questions. But note that just such questions are acceptable that are connected to the counselling process and objectives. The questions should be clear and easily understandable and have to match with the verbal skills of the dialogue partner. To avoid misunderstandings, counsellors should make the background of their questions transparent (e.g. “This question may seem odd to you, but considering your further training goals it is important for me to have the respective information.”). Technical terms and abbreviations may be obvious for you, but can frustrate and confuse the client. Added to this, many clients – especially those with another mother tongue – may not even dare to inquire. Further to avoid are questions that are or seem nosy or intrusive or purely serve the counsellor’s “therapeutic interest”.

Ideally, only one question at once should be asked to help the client’s concentration. Short periods of silence trigger the client to talk and recount a little more. However, in case you





aren't sure how to understand or interpret what your dialogue partner just said, it is better to ask once too much than once too less.

Keeping in mind nonverbal communication:

As illustrated in the iceberg model of communication, only 20 % of communication is done on a factual and objective level, while 80 % of it happens on the level of emotions and social relationships. Therefore, the success of a counselling process highly depends on a good and trusting relationship between client and counsellor. Each respective investment is worthwhile! Observing nonverbal signals, modes of expression and behavioural modes of the person seeking advice provides essential information to establish such a relationship. If you get certain impressions – for example that the client is extraordinarily quiet or talkative, that he or she doesn't open up or that he or she is reluctant -, that issue can be addressed in a polite, appreciative and objective way (e.g. "I get the impression you don't really want to talk about that. Am I right? Is there something specific you are concerned about?", „You seem like you have to say a lot about that. I propose we first focus on [...].“).

Active listening:

Listening and first and foremost active listening is the basis of good counselling, especially when the person seeking advice talks about problems, doubts and fears. Small nonverbal signs – such as signs of consent and approval – as well as an open posture, facing the client, show that you are concentrated and interested and „actively“ look for solutions or try to understand the situation. That may encourage the dialogue partners to open up. Likewise, short summaries in your own words („paraphrases“) are another way to get a deeper understanding of the client's situation and to invite him or her to explain in greater detail.

While listening doesn't necessarily mean to agree with everything, you should try to understand the client's way of thinking. That enables you to react adequately to their worries and needs and to take corrective actions where necessary. Questions that point out discrepancies or wrong assumptions or trigger the client to think about possible solutions, can





be helpful.

Staying objective:

Especially when counsellor and client experience disagreements or tensions, it is essential to stay matter-of-factly and to discuss those issues in an open and calm way. When people seeking advice react in an aggressive, belittling or arrogant way, the counsellor should keep calm and actively address the respective, dysfunctional mode of communication. It is important that the counsellor doesn't take the client's behaviour personally: Usually, it mainly reflects the emotional state of the client and could be – for example – the result of fear or self-doubt. If necessary, the counsellor should remind the client about roles, hierarchies and the general (legal) conditions in the counselling situation (e.g. „As an expert on the labour market, I need to tell you that the professional prospects in that area are very limited.“).

Defining boundaries:

Professional counselling also means to be aware of one's limits and boundaries and to clearly express what counselling can and can not do! It is a key competence for any counsellor to communicate boundaries in a clear but polite way without risking that the person seeking advice feels belittled, not accepted or at the mercy of someone. When necessary, it may be a good idea to inform about alternative options – such as psychological counselling for people with learning disabilities or test anxieties, debt counselling, legal aid offices or psychotherapy – and to explain the general institutional conditions.

Last but not least:

Counselling never goes without giving the person seeking advice the freedom to make his or her own choices and mistakes and to take responsibility for himself or herself.

