Counseling Microskills

- Microskills are the basic foundational skills involved in effective helping relationships.
- They are the foundational tools on which the success of interventions with clients may depend.
- They help to create the necessary conditions from which positive change can take place.
- They provide the client with such alliance building constructs as empathic understanding, genuineness and acceptance, and will greatly facilitate the development of a safe therapeutic environment.
- They will aid in establishing rapport with clients.

Essential Counseling Microskills

- **Rapport** can be understood as a harmonious or empathic relationship.
- The development of rapport starts with the initial contact and continues throughout the counseling process.

- Effective rapport is crucial for individuals seeking counseling, as this may be the first encounter with a professional counselor and this interaction may either encourage or discourage the client from seeking counseling in the future or following up for subsequent counseling sessions.

- The microskills are a set of verbal and behavioral responses that facilitate the process of counseling and alliance formation regardless of the professional counselors’ theoretical orientation.

- These skills are presented as a hierarchy that is organized within a systematic framework.

- At the bottom of the hierarchy are the basic attending skills such as patterns of eye contact, body language, and tone of voice.

- A bit farther up the skills hierarchy is the basic listening sequence, which includes questioning, paraphrasing, summarizing, and reflection of feelings.

Attending Skills

- Good communication involves more than just verbal content—much communication takes place non-verbally.

- Following validation and education, clients ranked nonverbal gestures and presentation and body language as the most important alliance building factors.

- Non-verbal attending behaviors communicate a counselor’s interest, warmth and understanding to the client, and include such behaviors as eye contact, body position, and tone of voice.

Eye Contact

- Maintaining good **eye contact** is how a professional counselor conveys interest, confidence, and involvement in the client’s story.
For those clients who have difficulty with closeness, making eye contact can be an important vehicle of change.

There should be natural breaks in eye contact; eye contact should be more of an “ebb and flow” as you collect your thoughts and listen to your client’s story.

It is essential to be sensitive to differences in how eye contact is expressed across cultures.

**Body Position**
- **Your body position** should convey to the client your interest and involvement.
- Face the client and adopt an open, relaxed, and attentive body posture, as this will assist in putting your client at ease
- Do not cross arms and legs
- Do not sit behind a desk or other barrier
- Slightly lean in the upper body toward the client

Let your clients decide the physical distance between you and them by offering to let them arrange the chairs at an individual comfort level, but make sure to set up your own personal space boundaries, too

**Vocal Tone**
- Emotions are frequently conveyed via **tone of voice**. The pitch, pacing, and volume can all have an effect on how a client responds emotionally to a professional counselor.
- Your voice can do much to help create a soothing and anxiety-regulating atmosphere for the client.
- Learn to use your voice as a therapeutic tool
- **Verbal underlining**—giving increased vocal emphasis to certain words or short phrases—helps convey a sense of empathic understanding.

**The Basic Listening Sequence**
- The **basic listening sequence** represents a set of interrelated skills used to achieve three overarching goals:
  - To obtain an overall summary and understanding of the client’s presenting issue
  - To identify the key facts of the client’s situation
  - To identify the core emotions and feelings the client is experiencing

  The skills involved in the basic listening sequence are: open and closed questions, paraphrasing, reflection of feelings, and summarizing.

**Open and Closed Questions**
- **Questioning** is a primary skill that allows professional counselors to gather important and specific information about clients.
Questions allow us to make an accurate assessment of the client’s issues and guide and focus our clients so we can make the most effective use of the counseling session.

But, used inappropriately, questioning can impede communication and block client disclosure (e.g., drilling clients with questions).

Open Questions

Open questions usually elicit fuller and more meaningful responses by encouraging the client to talk at greater length.

Open questions typically begin with what, how, could, would, or why, and are useful to help begin an interview, to help elaborate the client’s story, and to help bring out specific details.

With open questions, the client can choose the content and direction of the session.

Be careful when using why questions and questions that are leading in nature. Questions that begin with “why” often:

- Cause the client to intellectualize and can lead to a discussion of reasons
- Cause a client to begin to rationalize or intellectualize their problems, when what we really want them to do is to explore the deeper meaning and feelings behind their issues
- Cause the client to become defensive and to feel “put on the spot”

Leading questions often contain a hidden agenda because the answer or expectation is already imbedded within the question.

Although well intentioned, these types of questions place too much power into the hands of the professional counselor and tend to push the client into a preconceived direction.

Closed Questions

Closed questions can be used when professional counselors need to obtain very specific concrete information and get all the facts straight.

Closed questions typically elicit either a “yes/no” type of response or provide specific factual information.

The use of too many closed questions can cause the client to shut down and become passive because in essence you are training the client to simply sit back and wait for the next question to answer.

Begin with open questions (i.e., general), and as you gather information and hear the client’s story, move to more closed questions (i.e., specific) to obtain the specific details important for the assessment and subsequent intervention plan.

Open Vs. Closed Questions

Professional counselors often need to use closed questions to identify and bring out specific details to aid in assessment and treatment planning.
However, one can often obtain the same information by asking open questions; so try to refrain from moving too quickly into a closed questioning approach unless you are unable to obtain the information otherwise.

The Reflecting Skills
The reflecting skills represent a set of interventions used to help stimulate clients’ exploration of their thoughts and feelings related to the presenting problems.

These skills will also stimulate a deeper understanding of the problem so that the client can examine the issues more objectively.

Reflecting skills include: paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, and summarizing.

Paraphrase
A paraphrase is how we feed back to the client the essence of what has just been spoken in our own words.

By paraphrasing, one reflects the content and thoughts of the client’s message. A counselor is mirroring back to the client, in a nonjudgmental way, an accurate understanding of the client’s communication and the implied meaning of that communication.

It is important that the paraphrased information is accurate by checking in with the client.
This “checking in” also allows for the building of a collaborative relationship with your clients and conveys your interest and care in accurately understanding their message.

Reflecting Feelings
By reflecting feelings a professional counselor can help the client become aware of the emotions experienced in relation to the issue at hand.

Reflecting feelings can promote the development of accurate empathy and help to create a safe environment for the client.

To reflect feelings one must be able to recognize and put words to those feeling states observed in the client.

To aid in identifying a client’s feelings:
Pay attention to the affective component of the client’s communication
Pay attention to the client’s behavior (e.g., posture, tone of voice, facial expression)
Use a broad range of words to correctly identify the client’s emotions
Silently name the client’s feeling(s) to yourself

When reflecting feelings to your client:
Use an appropriate introductory phrase (e.g., sounds like....., you feel...., it seems...etc)
Add a feeling word or emotional label to the stem
Add a context or brief paraphrase to anchor or broaden the reflection
Pay attention to the tense (present tense reflections can often be more powerful)
Do not repeat the client’s exact words
Reflect mixed emotions
Check out the accuracy of the reflection of feeling with the client

**Summarizing**

- By summarizing, a professional counselor can begin to put together the key themes, feelings, and issues the client has presented.

By distilling the key issues and themes and reflecting this back to the client, counselors can begin to help clients make sense of what may have originally seemed to be an overwhelming and confusing experience.

A summary is not only to be used at the end of the session or begin a new session by re-capping the previous session, but can be used periodically throughout the session, helping to keep a focus and putting together the pertinent issues at hand for the client.

A summary may be appropriate when:
- Your client is rambling, confused, or overly lengthy in comments
- When your client presents a number of unrelated ideas
- To provide direction to the interview
- To help move from one phase of the interview to the next
- To end the interview
- To provide an opening to the interview by summing up the prior interview

There are three common types of summaries:
- **Focusing summaries** are often used at the beginning of the session to pull together prior information the client has given and to provide a focus to the session
- **Signal summaries** are used to “signal” to the client that you have captured the essence of their topic and that the session can move on to the next area of concern
- **Planning summaries** help to provide closure and are used to recap the progress, plans, and any recommendations/agreements made