**Module 6**

**M6.WS6 - Introduction to Helping Skills**

To introduce this topic with peers, it is best to start with an activity that helps the participants reflect on their own experiences when they received help in their personal lives. The facilitator is to use this activity as a means to elicit valid points from the participants, so that after the activity the facilitator can proceed to talk about the Helping Skills

***Activity – recalling receiving help***

* Ask participants to think of an episode where they were going through a difficult time and sought help from someone (e.g. friend, relative, teacher, etc.), and the help received was effective;
* Ask the participants to think about this experience and answer the following questions on a piece of paper:
  + When you spoke to your helper, what kind of help were you seeking?
  + What were you worried about?
  + What did you hope to accomplish as a result of your discussion?
  + How did the helping person treat you?
  + What were the helping person’s attitudes towards you and towards your concern?
  + What response patterns did you notice about the person who offered you help?
  + What were the most memorable characteristics of the person who offered to help you?
* Then ask the participants again to think of another episode where they were going through a difficult time, and the help they sought did not result in success, but felt not understood;
* Ask the same questions as above;
* Ask participants to compare and contrast the two helping experiences, and then engage in a group discussion to share the views;

***Activity – role plays***

* It is recommended that after each topic below, or after a couple of topics, role plays are held so that the participants can practice what they learnt, and feedback would be given on the application of helping skills during the role play;
* For the role plays, the participants can be asked to come up with either a personal or fictitious experience to talk about, so that the other participant could practice the skills.

**ATTENDING AND ACTIVE LISTENING**

Attending and listening construct the very basis of a helping relationship, that create the appropriate atmosphere for a helping conversation to take place between the helping person and a client. If practiced properly, attending and listening allow the client to feel comfortable to open and disclose their personal issues, and develop the helping conversation into more depth.

The first step is to ***attend*** to the client, which means to be physically and psychologically present for the other person and give them the undivided attention they deserve. It requires to put away all distractions, concerns, thoughts, and worries, and instead focus solely on the story of the other person and what they are saying. This is know as *psychological attending,* i.e. to free the mind and concentrate solely on the client.

In order to do proper attending during a helping conversation, apart from being *psychologically* present it is also important to be fully aware of one’s own physical posture as well, and therefore carry out *physical attending*. By maintaining the appropriate physical posture one would be communicating openness, attention and readiness to the client. Egan (1994) suggests five steps that a helping professional need to adopt to describe physical attending. These are represented with the acronym S.O.L.E.R. as follows:

S - Face the client **S**quarely;

O - maintain an **O**pen posture with the client;

L - **L**ean towards the client;

E - maintain appropriate **E**ye contact with the client;

R - stay **R**elaxed as by doing so you greatly improve

After the physical and the psychological presence has been devoted to the client, it is important to listen carefully to what is being said. ***Active listening*** is more than just listening to the words that the other person is saying. It involves observing the behaviour and body language of the person, how they speak and how the message is delivered. It also includes to notice what they don’t say. Having the ability to interpret a person's body language and non-verbal communication allows the listener to develop a more accurate understanding of the client's message. This involves observing and evaluating a person’s appearance, body posture, gestures, and facial expressions.

**EMPATHY**

Empathy is the ability to experience the thoughts, feelings, and the subjective perspectives of another person, without losing one’s own objective view as an outsider. In order to be empathic, one needs to immerse in the experience of the other person: it requires a shift of perspective where one thinks and feels what the client is thinking and feeling, but at the same time maintain the sense of self.

In order to be empathic with another person’s thoughts and feelings, one needs to get to know the person very well and collect as much information as possible, such as family, friends, work, childhood background, fears, dreams, past traumas, etc. This information helps the listener to form a sound idea about the life background of the individual to understand where they are coming from. Without this information about the life background, it would be hard to *empathize* with the subjective experiences of that person.

***Communicating empathy***

After managing to feel and think what the other person is feeling and thinking, empathy needs to be communicated back to the other person. To be able to communicate empathy, the listener needs to accurately identify the feeling of the client so as to show them that they are being truly understood. For example, if the client is talking about a trauma that just happened in their life, there are a number of feelings that might describe the situation such as disappointment, frustration, sad, hurt, upset, afraid, bitter, hopeless, etc. To be truly empathic, the helping person has to recognize the appropriate feeling that describe the emotions of the client.

Communicating empathy mainly involves:

* Reflection of what the other person said, i.e. making statements in your own words that accurately represent the other person’s statements, and also include reflection of how the client is feeling, e.g. *you feel upset that your son refused to talk to you on the phone.*
* Use of supportive sounds in the form of utterances to indicate to the person that you are understanding what they are saying, whilst encouraging them to continue talking, e.g. “oh”; “mmm”; “uh-huh”; “yes”; “I see”;
* Mirroring, i.e. imitating the client’s posture, facial expression, and gestures, e.g. if the person feels worried and frowns, you may also frown;

The skill of empathy takes a lot of time to develop and refine. It requires a lot of exposure to human experiences as well as constant practice and feedback.

**QUESTIONING**

The use of questions is an essential element of a helping discussion. Questions enable to helping person to gather more information from the client, clarify facts, explore deeper the subject, and elaborate the discussion.

There are a number of principles that one needs to keep in mind when asking questions within the context of a helping conversation:

* *Questions should be intentional and with a purpose* – questions should not be asked sporadically and just for the sake of asking, but one should know why a question is being asked and what for;
* *Timing* - questions have to be asked in the appropriate time of the conversation and when necessary. It may be the case that some questions are asked at a later stage in the conversation, or not asked at all in the first place;
* *Not to ask too much questions ­*– when questions are used excessively in a conversation, these interrupt the natural flow of the discussion, may also hinder the expression and concentration of the individual;
* *Cultural sensitivity* – when asking questions one needs to be aware of any cultural norms, values, and customs that derive from the clients’ cultural background. Being sensitive to the client’s culture enables the helping person to ask appropriate questions especially on issues that might be very sensitive, e.g. class, sexual orientation, sex, serious illnesses, etc.;
* *Staying with the question ­*– at times responses to questions remain vague and do not give the information required. Therefore the helping person has to stay with the question, ask it in a different way, and try to gather the information that is required.

***Close-ended and Open-ended questions***

*Close-ended* questions are very focused, straight forward questions that can be answered in a word or few words.

*Open-ended* questions do not confine the responder to a short answer. Instead open-ended questions enable more liberty and flexibility in answering the question, encourage the responder to expand and elaborate further, and puts them in command of the conversation.

Examples:

*Close-ended:* Are you happy? Are you coming to my house today?

*Open-ended*: How do you feel? What will you do later on today?

**REFLECTION AND PARAPHRASING**

***Reflection*** refers to when the helping person reflects back to the client a specific part of the content that they just said, with the aim to encourage the individual to open more on the subject and continue elaborating further. This technique is mainly used in the form of a *probe* to enquire the client about the topic, instead of asking a direct question. In fact, reflection helps to avoid asking too many direct questions in a conversation.

***Paraphrasing*** consists of summarizing what the client has just said without changing the meaning. It requires the helping person to collect the main points, themes, and patterns that has been discussed by the client, and condense them into a shorter sentence to sum up the essence of the discussion. Whilst reflection is repeating just a short sentence that the client said, paraphrasing includes a general reflection of a number of points and themes that were mentioned during the conversation. Paraphrasing helps the client to ensure that they have been heard and understood correctly, and clarify their own thoughts as well.

**SILENCE**

The use of ***silence***in a helping conversation enables the client to speak more without interruption, to elaborate and expand further, and to process their thoughts and feelings without distraction. When clients are talking about a personal situation, it is possible they end up confused or uncertain how to proceed, and they end up pausing for a while to reconnect their thoughts. However, if the helping person is too quick to interrupt with a question, that might distract the thought process of the client. Therefore, when silence is used appropriately it helps the client to reflect deeper even though that moment of silence might feel awkward.

**FOCUSING**

During a helping conversation, it is likely that the client mentions a number of problems, issues, and themes that they would be experiencing or went through. By mentioning several problems at once, probably the client would be feeling all over the place and the thoughts would be disorganized. In such situations, the skill of ***focusing*** helps the client to concentrate on one issue or problem. This requires that the helping person, together with the client, put away the less important issues in order to talk about the main presenting problem that the client needs to deal with. Throughout this process the helping person helps the client to organize their thoughts and prioritize which are the most important problems that need to be addressed, and hence ***focus*** the attention on where it is most needed.

**NON-JUDGMENTAL ATTITUDE**

One needs to appreciate that as persons we all have our own values that influence our behaviour and the way we talk with other persons. When working with people who come from different life backgrounds, it is highly probable to encounter individuals whose values and belief systems might be in conflict against our own, and this might result in behaviour and responses that may give away the message of unacceptance towards the other person. Therefore, when working with vulnerable individuals it is important to maintain a ***non-judgmental attitude***, which refers to a total acceptance of the other person for who they are, where they come from, their thoughts and their feelings. It may be the case that the behaviours of the person are wrong and not acceptable, and hence non-judgmental attitude does not necessarily mean accepting these behaviours. However, it still calls for an unconditional acceptance of the human being.

**IMMEDIACY**

**Immediacy** occurs when something unexpected during the conversation happens, and the helping person examines the particular moment by pointing out and addressing with the client what is happening in the conversation. This is also called *here-and-now*, and it is used to gather a deeper meaning and understanding of what the client is experiencing, e.g. whilst talking about the client’s children, the client starts jerking the leg nervously. The helping person would stop the conversation about the children and ask about the reaction instead: “I noticed that when we mentioned your children, you started shaking your leg. What is going on?” – when focusing on the immediacy of the moment, the client might open up about how the children make them feel, or how long they haven’t seen their children, or even speak about a traumatic event that occurred with their children.

**UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD**

This refers to the attitude of complete acceptance and affirmation for the person and seeing the individual as inherently human who deserves to be loved. Unconditional acceptance for the person however does not mean that one has to accept behaviours, especially when such behaviours are harmful to self or to others, or go against the norms and values of society. Yet, in a helping relationship the individual must be accepted at a level much deeper than surface behaviour, and the helping person has to see the human being beyond that behaviour.

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