**Concepts and Application of Effective Communication and**

**Listening Skills**

Effective communication and listening are foundational to telephone counseling relationships. The specific strategies and skills are the vehicles with which we assist those callers that are experiencing a wide variety of challenges.

Carl Rogers is widely regarded as one of the most eminent therapists and authors, and he designed a therapy approach called Client-Centered Therapy, introduced in the 50’s and his therapy techniques continue to be widely used and effective today. Several of Roger’s basic principles are incorporated in effective communication and listening techniques applicable to serving on the Hotline. Some of the basic principles are delineated below.

**Empathetic Understanding**

1. Create an environment that is comfortable, receptive and safe.
2. Allow the caller to lead the discussion.
3. Show unconditional positive regard. It is important to accept the caller as she is, even if you disagree with her behavior. (non-judgmental).
4. Listen carefully for verbal and nonverbal content.
5. Demonstrate empathetic understanding by reflecting the caller’s feelings and thoughts so that she will gain clearer understanding of thoughts, perceptions, and emotions.

**Self-Concept**

Rogers (1959) defined self-concept as “the organized, consistent set of perceptions and beliefs about oneself”. The self-concept determines how one sees themselves and how they interact with others. When the self-concept is in line with reality, Rogers referred to it as congruence. When the self-concept is not aligned with reality there is incongruence. Through the process of Client-Centered Therapy, Rogers believed that people could learn to adjust their self-concept in order to achieve congruence and a more realistic view of themselves and the world. Rogers believed that people had the capacity for self-healing and personal growth leading to self-actualization.

**Key Skills for Effective Listening and Communication on the hotline**

1. Remove all distractions possible in order to totally focus on the caller.
2. Listen carefully for verbal content, feelings and non-verbal information. It is often helpful to take brief notes for important information and feelings expressed by the caller. Focused attending behavior demonstrates to the caller that you respect her as a person and that you are interested in what she has to say.
3. Do not be afraid to wait if the caller is silent. We often are uncomfortable with silent pauses and feel a need to begin talking to fill the silence. However, callers may be struggling to find the words to express what they are feeling. The caller may be trying to maintain their composure before speaking; it is generally more difficult to organize thoughts and communicate when feeling anxious. The silence or hesitation may be due to the fact that this is the first time that the caller has taken the risk to share this very sensitive and personal information.
4. Make an effort to genuinely be interested and not just go through the motions when listening to a caller. Do not attempt to fake it! Callers perceive genuine focus and interest in what they are communicating.
5. Try to relate to the caller by putting yourself in her position. Being able to truly relate to the caller’s concerns demonstrates empathy. Empathy is an important component in establishing the relationship and facilitating communication with the caller.
6. Listen for meaning behind the caller’s words. This will help in decoding the underlying message. Focus on main topic areas, speech tone, pitch, fluency and the emotion behind the words communicated.
7. Be aware of “trigger words” that may increase your emotions and feelings. This can affect your judgment and listening effectiveness. This requires a balance because it requires that you feel what the caller is expressing, but to not allow your own feelings to become a distraction.
8. Take the necessary time needed for good listening. If you feel rushed or distracted, you will not be fully engaged with the caller. This can be challenging when there are a large number of callers during a shift. It is important not to allow other calls coming in to the hotline to distract you from the current caller. Each caller requires your undivided attention until you reach a point where you are able to appropriately end the call.
9. Treat what the caller shares as privileged communication. Maintain confidentiality within The Upper Room with the exceptions of the caller harming herself, a third party, or if there is probable cause that the caller has engaged in child abuse or neglect.
10. Use language that is at a level similar to the caller in order to better relate.
11. Demonstrate acceptance of the caller with a positive attitude and using techniques which keeps the flow of communication open. Short phrases (emotional encouragers) such as “uh-huh” and “yes, go on” implies an attitude of acceptance, interest and serves to keep the flow of communication open.
12. Reflective listening skills are used to check out the essence of both the content and feelings that the caller has communicated.

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| Reflective listening |
| **What is reflective listening?**  Reflective listening appears deceptively easy, but it takes practice and skill to do well. In reflective listening, the listener tries to clarify and restate what the other person is saying.  The benefits of reflective listening are that it can:   * Increase the listener's understanding of the other person * Help the other person clarify their thoughts * Reassure the other person that someone is willing to attend to their point of view and wants to help them express their thoughts.   **What does reflective listening involve?**  When practicing reflective listening, you should:   * Listen more than you talk. * Responding to what is personal in what's being said, rather than to impersonal, distant or abstract material. * Restate and clarify what the speaker has said; don't ask questions or say what you feel, believe or want. * Try to understand the feelings reflected in what the speaker is saying, not just the facts or ideas being presented. * Work to develop the best possible sense of the speaker's frame of reference while avoiding the temptation to respond from your own frame of reference. * Respond with acceptance and empathy, not with indifference, cold objectivity or false concern.   **How do I know when I’m using reflective listening effectively?**  To identify ways in which you could improve your reflective listening, ask yourself, did you:   * Allow speakers to completely state their thoughts or opinions without interrupting? * Actively try to remember the important facts or points made by others? * Jot down any details or points raised by others? * Repeat back the gist of, or summarize, the points of view expressed? * Keep an open mind, even if I found the points made by others disagreeable? * Avoid being hostile towards views that differed from my own? * Express genuine interest in the conversation of others?   Adapted from R.F. Stein and S.N. Hurd (eds) (2000), *Using Student Teams in the Classroom: A Faculty Guide,* Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc., pp. 57–58; and D. Fisher, [Communication in Organizations](http://www.analytictech.com/mb119/reflecti.htm), St. Paul, MN: Jaico. |

1. Summaries are reflections that pull together several items that the caller has communicated. Summaries help callers to hold and reflect on the experiences they have expressed. This requires that the phone counselor stay focused and take notes or bullet points that reflect key information expressed by the caller.
2. Use probing to draw the caller out and get deeper or more meaningful information. For example, “What do you think would happen if you…?
3. It is important to affirm the caller by acknowledging particular strengths, abilities, good intentions and efforts. Affirmation is a way of thinking; always looking for positives regarding the caller. Acknowledge the caller’s willingness to share her problems, issues and feelings. For example, “I appreciate your willingness to share this very difficult issue”.
4. Use redirection if the caller begins to show signs of aggression, agitation or anger. This is a time to shift to another topic. If the caller threatens or becomes abusive to the phone counselor, the call should be ended in a calm and professional manner.
5. At times feedback to the caller may involve discussing possible consequences of inaction. For example, “ What happened the last time you didn’t take your prescribed medication”.

**Potential Roadblocks to Communication**

* Avoid “why” questions since they tend to make callers defensive.
* Be careful not to provide quick reassurance like, “Don’t worry about that.”
* Do not advise the caller in taking specific action, but allow the caller to determine if and when to take action. It is the caller, not the phone counselor who produces change. The phone counselor honors and respects the caller by showing that she is capable of growth and it is the caller’s choice whether or not to change.
* Do not attempt to force the caller to talk about something that she would rather not talk about.
* Avoid patronizing statements like, “You poor thing, I know just how you feel.”
* Be careful not to preach. “You should stop eating desserts since you already have a weight problem.”
* Be careful not to interrupt the caller. The caller may feel that you are not interested or that you don’t feel that what the caller is saying is worthwhile.

**Questions directed at the Caller to Facilitate Communication**

* Ask open ended questions so they can’t be answered with a simple yes or no, e.g., “How have you been feeling at work?” “What change do you think might make the biggest difference for you?” “How might you approach a meeting with your boss?”
* Encourage expression of feelings or attitudes. “How would it be for you if you told your husband what you have shared with me?”
* Ask questions that focus the caller concerns. “what would be most helpful to discuss now?”
* Explore what has been done previously. “What have you attempted in the past to resolve this issue?”
* Ask questions about what might be done differently next time. “How might you respond differently next time?
* Ask questions that call for further dialogue. “Can you tell me more?”
* Ask specific questions to gain information. Do you have family close by?” Do you participate in activities in the community?”

**References**

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