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Useful Counselling Micro-Skills

In the previous chapter we discussed the way counsellors can make use of typical adolescent communication processes such as mutual self-disclosure and digression. We also discussed issues of control and advice-giving. In this chapter, we will discuss a variety of counselling micro-skills which, when counselling young people, can be used to promote change. We strongly believe that these micro-skills need to be used in a context which at some level parallels the normal adolescent communication processes as described in the previous chapter.

Counselling micro-skills commonly used with adults are also useful when counselling young people, but there are some important differences in the way in which they are selected and used when working with young people.

Many counsellors who work with adults typically make extensive use of those particular counselling micro-skills which fit with their primary theoretical frame of reference. This is sensible, even for counsellors who claim to be eclectic, because it enables them to bring some consistency and structure into the counselling process. A detailed description of the most commonly used counselling micro-skills coming from a variety of therapeutic models is provided in our books *Practical Counselling Skills* (Geldard and Geldard, 2005, available in the UK and Europe) and *Basic Personal Counselling* (Geldard and Geldard, 2012, available in Australia and New Zealand).

Counselling young people involves different demands from those encountered when counselling adults. By making use of a very wide range of counselling micro-skills, the counsellor can create a changing and dynamic process to engage the curiosity and interest of the young person. The skills can be used in a process that parallels the relatively low level of structure which is common in adolescent developmental processes. Counsellors who work with young people will therefore have an advantage if they have the knowledge and ability to enable them to use the widest possible range of counselling micro-skills. These need to be proactively selected at appropriate points in time to take advantage of presented opportunities in the counselling process, so that the young client becomes engaged and energized in seeking to discuss and resolve problems.

In this chapter we will describe a wide range of counselling micro-skills and, wherever relevant, will indicate how these can be of particular use when working with young people. The counselling micro-skills we will describe need to be used within the

overall counselling process, as shown in Figure 9.2. It needs to be recognized that the micro-skills are used in the context of the primary counselling functions of relationship building, assessing the problem and addressing the problem.

Counselling micro-skills can be used either in direct response to the needs of the counselling process or in conjunction with any of the counselling strategies described in Chapters 14 to 17. Counselling micro-skills can be broadly grouped under the following headings, although there will be some overlap:

- observation
- active listening
- giving feedback
- use of questions
- challenging
- instructions
- the use of humour.

Observation

Observation can be extremely useful in contributing to the overall assessment of a young person's presentation. It needs to occur continually, as an ongoing activity, during each counselling session. However, when counselling young people, we have to be careful how we interpret our observations because they may sometimes be misleading. What a counsellor observes, when counselling a young person, is an external presentation which may disguise what is happening internally. This is because young people are uncertain about themselves and are uncertain about how open they can be if they are to continue receiving acceptance. Because they are in a state of change, their cognitive processes are complex, and they tend to make use of their defences more quickly than most adults.

While recognizing that our observations of a young person may be observations of a façade hiding the real person, we need to respond to that façade as though it were the real person. By accepting and responding to the façade we demonstrate to the young person that we are accepting of what they are presenting to us. In effect, we are doing as described in Chapter 9: we are believing the young person. By accepting the façade we can create trust, and through that trust the young person is more likely to feel safe in showing us what is behind the façade. In addition, by accepting the façade, we validate the individual presentation that the young person wishes to show to us.

If we wanted to join with someone who only spoke a foreign language, we would need to learn that language in order to communicate effectively with them and join with them. Similarly, when counselling a young person, we need to learn from the young person's behavioural and verbal language. We can do this by observing their behavioural, speech and language patterns. We can then, at an appropriate level, parallel

their communication processes so that, in effect, we speak the same language. By doing this we can gain the young person's trust, join with them and enter their world. When paralleling a young person's communication processes we need to be careful not to behave as though we ourselves were young people, but to use similar processes to theirs while remaining congruent and true to ourselves.

“It helps to speak the young person's language”

Observation can provide information about the young person with regard to mood, culture, self-esteem, creativity and social influences. Important attributes of the young person which need to be observed include:

- general appearance
- behaviour
- mood and affect
- speech and language.

General appearance

A young person's general appearance is a reflection of the way in which they wish to be seen and gives an indication of how they would like to be. It is an outward expression of the internal attempt to form a personal identity. Counsellors need to be careful about the way in which they interpret a young person's general appearance. Unfortunately, as counsellors, we all have our own personal prejudices and personal stereotypes. Consequently, a young person's appearance can seriously influence the way we feel towards and relate with them. We need to be careful that we do not over-interpret and we need to take time to get to know them so that we understand who they are and discover what is happening internally for them.

Imagine a young person who has tattoos and body piercing. Such a person might be aggressive and anti-social, or might be a person who is gentle, caring and vulnerable but wishes to appear to be tough and individualistic. We can't know which is true just by observing appearance.

A young person's appearance can tell us the extent to which they feel free to express themselves, and the extent to which they are constricted and constrained and unable to express themselves freely. Where a young person has put a lot of effort into presenting themselves in a particular way, they may be wanting to give the message 'Hey, take notice of me'. If this is the case, it may be extremely helpful in joining, for the counsellor to respond to the implied request, 'Take notice of me', by letting the young person know that they have noticed. This can be done by commenting on, and positively connoting, aspects of the young person's appearance.

Behaviour

A young person's behaviour can give a counsellor useful information about ways in which to match and join. For example, consider the case of a young client who is really talkative and has poor boundaries. In this case, it would be inappropriate for a counsellor to respond by being quiet and withdrawn; instead, the counsellor would need to match the conversational style of the young person and in this way allow joining to occur with ease. If the counsellor were to do otherwise, the young person might receive an implied message which said 'The way you are behaving is not OK'. Similarly, consider the case of a young person who has poorly defined boundaries: it might be tempting for a counsellor to respond by modelling and displaying well-defined boundaries to try to get the young person to modify their behaviour. Unfortunately, this would be likely to undermine the joining process and alienate the client. To join, the counsellor needs to match the young person's behaviour while being congruent and appropriate. By doing so the behaviour is validated and the young person receives a message that this behaviour is acceptable for the counsellor. To do otherwise gives the young person the message that they are being judged and are not OK and are not accepted by the counsellor. Consequently, the chance of joining will be diminished.

When young people behave in ways which seem to be socially inappropriate it needs to be recognized that they may not have the skills to enable them to behave more acceptably. Although, at times during the counselling relationship, counsellors may be able to model desirable behaviours, the processes of joining and engaging demand that counsellors should to some extent modify their own behaviour, within the limits of their own personal identity, to match and satisfy the needs of the young people they seek to help. If they are unable to do this, their young clients are unlikely to be able to relate comfortably with them because they may not know how to relate differently.

Young people are in a process of learning how to relate in new ways as they move from childhood into adulthood. Thus it is not surprising that often their ability to use socially mature behaviour is limited. Modelling is certainly useful in helping young people to learn new behaviours but can only be effective within the context of an effective relationship.

Adolescent behaviours such as restlessness, agitation and lethargy can give a counsellor an indication of a young person's current emotional state. However, as will be discussed, some caution needs to be exercised in assessing mood from the observation of behaviour because many young people are skilled at hiding their true feelings.

Mood and affect

When observing young people we need to be clear about the difference between mood and affect. *Mood* is the internal feeling or emotion which often influences behaviour and the individual's perception of the world. *Affect* is the external emotional response (World Health Organization, 1997). The underlying mood of a young person may be

disguised by the presenting affect. For example, it is not uncommon for young people who are suffering from an underlying emotional state of depression to present not as depressed, but as anxious and agitated.

“Mood may be hidden behind affect”

Consider the case of an adolescent boy whose parent has died. He may be inwardly experiencing a high level of depression and sadness, but may outwardly demonstrate hostility and anger. In such a situation, the counsellor needs to be able to go beneath the presenting affect so that the young person is able to identify, own and experience the underlying mood. In order to do this, the counsellor needs to observe the presenting affect and deal with that fully so that, as a consequence, the client can move into a deeper level of experiencing with recognition, acceptance and ownership of the underlying mood of depression and sadness.

Often, the presenting affect will be appropriate for the young person's situation. It is, for example, understandable that a young person whose parent has died might respond angrily, even though the underlying mood is depression and sadness. By recognizing the presenting affect, the counsellor can reflect it back and also normalize it as being appropriate and normal at that stage in the young person's grieving process. Observation of the *absence* of affect is particularly important, especially where young people have suffered traumatic or stressful experiences. In these cases, an absence of affect might indicate that a young person is dissociating or is out of touch with reality and may be developing serious mental health problems.

Clearly, a major goal in counselling is to help the client to feel better. This means that in the long term both affect and mood need to be influenced by the counselling process. The first step in achieving this is for accurate observation to occur.

Speech and language

When observing the speech and language of young people, counsellors need to attend to:

- what is said
- how it is said
- the language used.

What is said

The content of what the young person says tells the counsellor what they are thinking and gives an indication of their beliefs, ideas and general constructs about their world. While listening to the client, the counsellor can gain information about the young person's intellectual functioning and thought processes. This will include information

about their ability to remember things accurately, to think logically, to use abstract thinking and to concentrate. This information is required to enable the counsellor to select suitable counselling strategies. For example, it is clearly not going to be helpful for a counsellor to use a counselling strategy that requires a high level of intellectual ability with a client who does not have that level of functioning.

How it is said

How the young person talks is also important. We need to remember that many young people typically flit from subject to subject as a normal part of their communication. However, the counsellor needs to note whether the conversation has some logical sequence or is totally disjointed, with the continual introduction of unrelated ideas.

Sometimes a young person's conversation may be disjointed as a consequence of them being overwhelmed by current circumstances. In this case, the counsellor may need to help them to structure the conversation so that information is presented more clearly. Where young people are flitting from subject to subject between clauses, in other words where derailment is occurring with no meaningful relationship between the ideas being expressed, then the presence of severe mental health problems may be indicated.

The language used

The language used by the client gives an indication of the client's ability to be articulate and to be able to express ideas clearly. This information can be helpful in enabling the counsellor to select counselling strategies to match the client's intellectual ability. Some young people will use 'street language' when talking with a counsellor. This language involves the use of a vocabulary of jargon words which are commonly used by the young person's peer group. The use of these words may be meaningless or confusing for many adults, particularly as such vocabularies are subject to change with the inclusion of new words and new meanings from time to time. Counsellors working with young people need to learn the meaning of these jargon words, so that they can understand and join with the language of the client. Where a counsellor is unsure of the meaning of a particular word it is best to be honest about this and to ask the young person directly: 'What does that word mean – it's new to me?' It might also be useful to seek clarification of words which can have a variety of meanings in contemporary situations.

Active listening

As when counselling adults, active listening is designed to help the client to recognize that the counsellor is attending carefully to what is being said, to help the counsellor join empathically with the client and to encourage the client to continue talking. Active listening includes:

- non-verbal responses
- encouragers
- accenting and amplifying
- reflection of content and feelings
- matching the young person's language
- summarizing
- noticing what is missing.

Non-verbal responses

The counsellor's non-verbal responses are likely to give a young person an indication that the counsellor is listening, an indication of the counsellor's level of interest in what is being said, and information about the counsellor's attitude to them. Non-verbal responses include making appropriate eye contact, acknowledging what has been said by nodding or by using appropriate facial expressions, and matching the young person's body posture and movements.

Encouragers

To signify that the counsellor is listening and to encourage the client to continue talking, counsellors can use a range of minimal responses or encouragers such as 'ah-hm', 'mm-hm', 'yes', 'right', 'really' and 'OK'. It needs to be recognized that these responses not only indicate that the counsellor is listening attentively, but also carry meaning. They may convey indications of a counsellor's attitudes, including approval and disapproval. There are also a number of short responses such as 'Tell me more', 'I see', 'I understand', 'Is that so?', 'I hear', and 'Go on', which can be used non-intrusively and similarly to the single-word minimal encouragers. When responding to the client, the counsellor's tone of voice and speed and volume of talking need to match the client's style and energy.

“Inappropriately delivered encouragers may be perceived as judgemental”

Generally, counsellors working with adults need to be careful to ensure that minimal encouragers convey a non-judgemental attitude. Many counsellors who work with adults will listen quietly and with a level of seriousness during the initial stages of counselling, and will demonstrate a fairly low level of emotional affect because they do not want to intrude on the adult's thought processes and conversation. Although, generally, counsellors working with young people also need to convey a non-judgemental attitude, joining with young people requires an emotional responsiveness which parallels the young person's communication processes. Young people tend to be more direct and

open with each other about their feelings and attitudes. Counsellors therefore need to deliver minimal encouragers proactively so that the emotional energy and tone of the young person are appropriately matched. Additionally, counsellors working with young people may give an indication of their own attitudes, when responding minimally, where this is appropriate and is not likely to make the client feel judged or criticized.

Accenting and amplifying

Accenting and amplifying involve a combination of verbal and non-verbal messages to feed back and emphasize what the client has said. The counsellor can do this verbally and also by using gesture, facial expression and voice intensity so that what the client has said is intensified and made newsworthy. By doing this the counsellor demonstrates positive support for what the young person is saying and encourages them to continue.

Accenting and amplifying are particularly important skills to use when counselling young people and should be used more than when counselling adults. This is because these skills enable the counsellor to validate what the young person is saying and also to join proactively with enthusiasm in the conversation, paralleling typical adolescent communication.

Reflection of content and feelings

Reflection of content and feelings were skills identified by Rogers (1955, 1965) as being important in counselling. Reflection of content involves reflecting back the content of what the client has just said. For example, if a young person has been talking about the way in which they have been in conflict with their brother recently, a reflection of content might be 'Your brother and you have been fighting recently' or 'You've told me that your brother and you have been fighting recently' or 'So, your brother and you have been fighting a lot recently'. When reflecting content, counsellors do not repeat what the client has said, but pick up the most important content information and, using their own words, feed this back to the client.

Reflection of feelings involves reflection of the perceived emotional affect of the client. The reflection may be as a result of things that the client has directly told the counsellor or may be the result of non-verbal behaviour by the client. For example, the counsellor may have noticed tears or a change in tone of voice. Examples of reflection of feeling are 'You're feeling sad' or 'You feel sad' or 'You're sad'. Sometimes, reflection of content and feelings are combined, as in the statement: 'You're sad because you've lost your best friend.'

When we are counselling young people we generally need to be careful not to overuse reflection. Instead, we need to use reflection in a limited way just to help the young person know that they are being heard and understood. The reason that we caution against the over-use of reflection when working with young people is that they do not, as a general rule, use reflection in their peer conversations. If as counsellors we want to join effectively with young people, we need to use a conversational style that is comfortable for them. Young people who are very verbal may be comfortable with a higher level of

reflection than others. Unfortunately, many young people respond to reflection by sitting silently and not continuing to talk. If we are to encourage them to continue talking we need to use more proactive micro-skills. As we will discuss later, there is a wide range of different types of questions which are extremely useful in raising the energy of a conversation with a young person and encouraging them to talk.

Matching the young person's language

Three ways in which counsellors need to match the use of language by young people involve:

- the use of vocabulary
- representational style
- metaphor.

Use of the young person's vocabulary

Some young people make use of words from culture-specific adolescent vocabularies. They may also attribute meanings to words which are different from commonly accepted meanings. Use of such vocabularies commonly occurs with young people who belong to peer groups or gangs associated with particular activities. If counsellors wish to join effectively with these young people and to communicate effectively with them, they need to understand, and perhaps use, language which is familiar, natural and comfortable for them. Counsellors may therefore need to learn from their clients so that they are able to understand and communicate with them using words which have meaning for them, rather than being restricted to using words which are in general use in adult conversation.

“We can learn from our young clients”

Matching representational style

Counsellors need to match the representational style which each individual adolescent client uses to think and communicate. As described in neuro-linguistic programming, people typically think by using one of three different representation modes (Grinder and Bandler, 1976) Some people tend to think visually and conceptualize pictorially, other thinks verbally and frame their thoughts in terms of things which they hear, and a third group think mainly in a sensory, kinaesthetic or feeling mode. Someone who thinks in a visual mode might say ‘I have difficulty seeing myself apologizing to Fred’, whereas a person who thinks in an auditory mode might say ‘I really can’t hear myself saying sorry to Fred’. Another person might use a kinaesthetic or feeling mode, and might say ‘I’d feel uncomfortable apologizing to Fred’. It is helpful if counsellors can join with their young clients by using the modes of expression which they use.

Use of metaphor

Young people will often talk metaphorically. For example, a young person might say ‘A black cloud seems to be over my head wherever I go’. In this case the metaphor of a black cloud might be being used to describe feelings of despair and depression. Where the client uses a metaphor, it is useful if the counsellor continues to use the client’s metaphor. In the example quoted, the counsellor might explore the young person’s feelings towards the cloud or might explore what the client believes would need to happen for them to be able to move from under the cloud into the sun. The counsellor might also refer back to the cloud at a later stage of the counselling process, thereby continuing the use of the metaphor (see Chapter 14 for a fuller discussion of the use of metaphor).

Summarizing

As with reflection of content and feelings, summarizing was identified as useful by Rogers (1955, 1965). Summarizing is very similar to reflection. When summarizing, counsellors feed back, in their own words, a brief and concise summary of what the client has said. This summary does not cover all the details of those things the client has discussed, but picks out only the most salient features. Summarizing lets the client know that the counsellor has heard and understood, and also enables the client to clarify thoughts, identifying what is most important.

Noticing what is missing

It is not sufficient just to notice what the client has said; it is also important to notice what is missing. The counsellor needs to look for gaps and unfilled spaces in the client’s story, and for evidence of conflicting information and hidden meanings. By sensitively, and without intrusion, inviting the client to explore these gaps or unfilled spaces, useful information may emerge. Through this process the young person may find alternatives and opportunities that are being missed. Noticing what is being missed is a concept which comes from narrative therapy (White, 2007).

We have discussed a range of skills which come under the heading ‘active listening’. If the counsellor proactively introduces these skills wherever appropriate, the counselling conversation will be enhanced and the possibility that the young person will be effectively engaged may be enhanced.

Giving feedback

As discussed, we can make use of reflection to feed back information which a young person has provided. This is one form of feedback. There are a number of other ways in which feedback can be given to young people:

- giving compliments
- giving affirmations
- cheer-leading
- normalizing
- reframing
- use of statements.

Giving compliments

Young people often find themselves in situations where they are told that they have done things which they should not have done. This is inevitable, considering their lack of adult experience and their developmental need to experiment with new behaviours. Consequently, many young people expect that adults will be critical of them.

The counselling situation can provide an opportunity to give young people positive feedback to help them to feel OK about themselves. It is appropriate for counsellors to compliment young people on their behaviour during the counselling process where such feedback is likely to be useful. They can also be complimented for decisions which they have made or actions they have taken which demonstrate their personal growth.

Compliments need to be used sensibly otherwise they may be seen as patronizing. Appropriately given compliments enable the young person to feel OK and to continue developing with confidence. Compliments given as feedback may also indicate that the counsellor has heard and understood the young person's story. For example, a young person may have been unduly provoked but may have responded with uncharacteristic control. After hearing the story, a counsellor might say 'Well done, that must have been very difficult to do'. Thus the behaviour is positively connoted and the young person is able to feel good about what they did.

Giving affirmations

Affirmations acknowledge and reinforce a personal truth that has been discovered by the client and shared with the counsellor. For example, a young person may have, in conversation, recognized that they are managing to achieve good results in a situation which is difficult for them. The counsellor might offer the affirmation 'You are obviously coping extremely well under difficult circumstances'. Notice that in this affirmation the counsellor did not say 'You believe that you are coping very well in difficult circumstances', but said 'You are coping very well'. This is the difference between affirmation and reflection. If the counsellor had used reflection, he would have said something like 'You believe that you are coping very well', which would have been a true reflection of what the young person had said. However, this is not very affirming and does not convey the message that the counsellor believes the client has done well.

“Reflection and affirmation are not the same”

Cheer-leading

Cheer-leading is a skill which comes from solution-focused therapy (O'Connell, 2012). Counsellors engage in cheer-leading when they show enthusiastic reactions of emotional support when clients relate that they have used new behaviours which are positive and different from behaviours which they have used before. Cheer-leading is based on the assumption that the young person has taken control and is responsible for the changes that have occurred.

Cheer-leading uses both questions and statements to encourage the young person to continue to describe the changing process. For example, the counsellor might ask, or say, with enthusiastic interest:

'How did you do that?'

'How did you manage to make that decision?'

'Well done. That must have been really difficult to do. How did you do it?'

'That sounds good!'

'That's amazing!'

Such counsellor responses help the young person to take responsibility for, and feel proud of, their success in achieving some change. Additionally, the client is encouraged to continue exploring the change and the process of change. This reinforces the idea that they can take responsibility for, and control, their behaviour. Such positive reinforcement is likely to help the young person to continue to take responsibility and control in their life, thus promoting the possibility of further change and a move towards adulthood.

Normalizing

Young people are in a changing world. As a consequence, they frequently become troubled by their emotions, responses and behaviours. Often these troubling emotions, responses and behaviours will be normal for the situation. Even so, at times, young people may believe that they are starting to 'go crazy' because they are experiencing high levels of emotional feelings which they have not previously experienced. In situations such as these it can be helpful for counsellors to tell young people that what they are experiencing is normal for the situation, providing that is genuinely the case.

Sometimes young people may react in ways which are disappointing for them, and they may have expectations of themselves that are unrealistic. Once again, it can be useful to normalize such responses and behaviours. Clearly, normalizing needs to be done in cases where unacceptable responses and behaviours are not already minimized.

We know that when young people are disclosing personal information with peers, a major goal for them is to validate their own experiences by checking out whether their peers have had similar experiences (Rotenberg, 2006). Young people are very concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others, as compared with what they feel they are (Erikson, 1987). Normalizing is therefore one of the most important counselling skills when working with young people.

Reframing

Reframing is an idea which is particularly useful when working with young people. It was developed as part of neuro-linguistic programming (Bandler and Grinder, 1979). Young people often have a very compartmentalized view of their world and are unable to see the broader picture. This can lead to unrealistically negative perceptions at times. Reframing encourages the young person to consider not just the part of the picture that they have been considering, but to see their part of the picture as part of a larger picture. It is as though the young person had a frame around a small part of the whole picture and was looking at what was within the frame. By choosing a larger frame, what was in the original frame is seen in a wider context.

To illustrate reframing, consider the example of an adolescent girl who is complaining that she frequently has to look after her younger nephew, whereas her twin sister never has to do this. In exploring the wider picture, it might emerge that she is allowed much more freedom than her twin sister and that she gets satisfaction out of being able to parent her nephew more competently than his mother (an older sister). A suitable reframe might be: 'My impression is that you may be more mature than both your sisters. Even though it must be tiresome for you looking after your nephew, you seem to be proud of your ability to parent him more capably than his mother, and your parents seem to trust you by giving you more responsibility and freedom than your twin sister'. This reframe might then enable the counsellor to help her explore her attitude and feelings related to wider issues of freedom and responsibility inherent in moving towards adulthood.

It is essential that reframes do not discount or deny the part of the picture which was initially in focus, but incorporate this part into the wider picture. Failure to do this would invalidate the perceptions of the client. The reframe must embrace the young person's perception, but build on that and enlarge it. They may then be able to recognize that what they have said has been believed and may be able to accept the reframe.

Reframing needs to be done tentatively so that the young person has the opportunity to reject the reframe if it does not fit for them. Reframing can enable clients to accept negative, destructive or oppressive situations or processes by viewing them within a wider, more positive context.

“A reframe needs to fit with the young person's perceptions”

Use of statements

Counsellor statements are extremely useful when counselling young people and can be used in a number of ways:

- Statements can be used to provide feedback when the young person is carrying out an activity associated with a counselling strategy (as described in Chapters 14 to 17). For example, if a young person is having difficulty in carrying out a particular task, the

counsellor might make a statement like ‘You seem to be finding it difficult to choose a symbol’.

- Statements can be used to enable the counsellor to feed back to the young person observations of the counselling process. For example, a counsellor might say ‘I’ve noticed that we seem to be going round in circles without finding a solution’.
- Statements can be used to feed back to the young person things that they are doing. For example, the counsellor might give feedback to the young person by saying: ‘I notice that your hands are clasped together really tightly’. This type of feedback statement comes from Gestalt therapy.
- Statements can be used paradoxically and with humour to feed back and exaggerate what the young person has said so that they will then challenge the exaggeration and recognize personal strengths. For example, the counsellor might say ‘So, you are absolutely hopeless and nothing you do ever succeeds. You are a total failure’. This paradoxical approach should only be used with those young people who have the ego strength to deal with the implied challenge, and needs to involve humour or it could be damaging.

Statements are also useful for purposes which are not related to feedback, such as:

- Statements can be used to help the counsellor clarify what might be happening to the young person at a particular moment. For example, a counsellor might suspect that a young person is really pleased with themselves as a result of something that they have done and might say ‘If I were you, I would feel really pleased with myself’.
- ‘I’ statements can be used to model taking responsibility for feelings, thoughts and behaviours. For example, the counsellor might, instead of saying ‘People don’t bother about that these days’, say ‘I don’t worry about that nowadays’.
- The counsellor can also use statements to structure the counselling process. For example, statements can be made about the levels of confidentiality which are available.

You may have noticed that, as with active listening, there are a number of different skills that can be used when giving feedback. If these skills are proactively selected, the counselling conversation can be enlivened so that the young person’s interest is maintained.

Use of questions

When we are working as counsellors with adults we are careful not to over-use questions. To do so might make the counselling conversation more like an interrogation. Similarly, when working with young children we are careful not to use too many questions. This is because when young children are asked questions by adults they will more often than not respond by saying what they think the adults want to hear. We believe that counselling young people is very different from counselling adults or children. In a counselling setting young people need to be engaged so that their interest is maintained. A good way

of promoting such engagement is to make use of suitable questions at appropriate times. There are many types of question taken from a number of counselling approaches that are particularly useful in helping to engage the interest of young people. We will describe each of these, but before we do we need to consider two important types of question.

Questions can be divided into two types: closed questions and open questions. Closed questions demand a specific response which may be very limited. An example of a closed question is 'Do you use drugs?'; this question is likely to lead to the answer 'yes' or 'no' and little else. When dealing with a young person before joining has occurred, the answer to this question is most likely to be 'no', regardless of whether the young person uses drugs or not.

An open question is one that elicits a wide range of descriptive answers. For example, instead of asking the closed question 'Do you take drugs?', the counsellor might ask the question 'What do you think about taking drugs?'. This invites the young person being questioned to think about possible answers and to describe an attitude or belief. It is more likely to result in an open discussion than a single-word answer.

Both types of question are useful, although generally the open question is more helpful in counselling because it encourages a conversational response and makes self-disclosure more likely.

At times, closed questions can be useful, particularly when specific information is required. For example, when enquiring about a young person's possible intention to commit suicide, answers to closed questions might enable a counsellor to make decisions about the ongoing safety and protection of the young person. We don't see a problem in asking young people closed questions at times. Indeed, we need to remember that young people are often very direct in seeking information from other young people. It can therefore be helpful for us to model their behaviour in this regard when appropriate. However, it can be risky to ask too many closed questions at a time because, if we do, the counselling session will be almost certain to degenerate into a question-and-answer session.

“Overuse of questions results in an interrogation, not counseling”

There are several different types of open question that are especially useful when counselling young people and these will now be described.

General information-seeking questions

We commonly use general information-seeking questions in everyday conversation in order to get information. Young people do the same with their peers. Often, when these questions are prefaced with words that indicate the counsellor's genuine curiosity and interest, the young person is likely to feel important as a source of information. For example, the

counsellor might say ‘I’m curious about your interest in collecting comics. What kind do you enjoy the most?’ or ‘I don’t know much about the skateboard scene. Can you fill me in?’

Questions to heighten the client’s awareness

These questions are commonly used in Gestalt therapy (Clarkson, 2013). The aim of these questions is to help the client to become more fully aware of what is happening within them, either somatically or emotionally, so that they can intensify those bodily or emotional feelings, deal with them, and move on to discussing associated thoughts. Typical questions in this category are:

- ‘What are you feeling emotionally right now?’
- ‘Where in your body do you experience that emotional feeling?’
- ‘Can you tell me what’s happening inside you right now?’
- ‘What’s happening inside you right now?’

If a young person is starting to cry, the counsellor might ask ‘Can you put words to your tears?’ This may enable the young person to verbalize thoughts related to the internal experience. By doing this, these thoughts can be processed, the counsellor is aware of them, and can achieve empathic joining and help the client move ahead. Similarly, if a young person seems to be stuck and unable to speak, the counsellor might ask ‘Can you tell me what is happening inside you right now? What are you experiencing internally?’

Circular questions

Circular questions come from the Milan Systemic Model of Family Therapy (Palazzoli et al., 1980). A circular question is a non-threatening way of getting information from a young person. Instead of asking the young person directly about how they feel or what that they think, or what their attitude is, the counsellor asks the young person how someone else feels or thinks, or asks what the other person’s attitude might be. For example, a counsellor might ask ‘I wonder what your brother thinks when your mother starts yelling and screaming at you?’ By asking circular questions such as these, the counsellor effectively invites the young person to talk about someone else’s feelings, thoughts, attitudes or beliefs. This is less threatening than asking the young person to talk about themselves. Often, having answered a circular question, the client will continue by talking about their own feelings, thoughts, attitudes or beliefs to make it clear whether they agree or disagree with the person who was mentioned in the circular question.

Transitional questions

Transitional questions are particularly useful when counselling young people because such questions typically occur in the everyday conversations young people have with their peers. Examples of transitional questions are:

‘Previously you talked a great deal about how your mother feels and how your stepfather feels. I’m wondering where your sister fits in?’

‘Earlier you talked about the option of leaving school. I’m wondering about how you’re feeling about that option now?’

‘Earlier you mentioned that you had had a troubling experience. I’m wondering whether you would like to tell me more about that?’

Transitional questions can be used for the following purposes:

1. To encourage the young person to return to discussion of an important topic or issue, particularly after the introduction of a digression (see Chapter 10).
2. To encourage the young person to move from talking about one aspect or topic to another.
3. To make it clear that the counsellor is an active participant in the conversation.
4. To enliven the conversation.

When using transitional questions the counsellor is proactive, having made a clear decision to be an active participant in the conversation, to introduce change and/or to enliven the interaction. It needs to be remembered that the emphasis, when working with young people, is different from that commonly used by counsellors who work with adults. With adults, greater emphasis is often placed on the need to stay with the adult’s processes rather than for the counsellor to be proactively engaged as a participant. By comparison, with young people we need to parallel their conversation, and transitional questions are extremely useful for this purpose.

“Following a digression, a transitional question can reintroduce an important issue”

Transitional questions do need to be used with some caution. They should only be introduced at points where the young person is not likely to be deflected away from discussion of important and/or painful material.

Choice questions

Choice questions have their origin in Reality therapy (Glasser, 2001). These questions imply that the client has choice about the way they think and behave. Examples of choice questions are:

‘What would have been a better choice for you to have made at that time?’

‘What would you like to do now? Would you like to continue talking about this issue or would you like to leave it there for now?’

‘What alternative ways could you respond to that?’

‘If the same situation arises during the coming weeks, what do you think you will do?
(Will you do this, or will you do that?)’

Such questions about the past, present or future enable the young person to look at the likely consequences of different behaviours. By exploring choices and consequences, they are likely to be better prepared for future situations.

The guru question

Guru questions have their origin in Gestalt therapy (Clarkson, 2013). When using this type of question, counsellors first invite the client to stand aside and look at themselves from a distance, and to give themselves some advice. For example, the counsellor might say ‘Imagine for a minute that you were a very wise guru and that you could give advice to someone just like you. What advice would you give them?’ Guru questions are particularly useful with young people because they commonly give advice to their friends. When they are invited to take up the guru position, they can often give themselves useful advice. Having heard the ‘guru’s’ advice they can then evaluate whether or not they want to follow that advice.

“Many young people enjoy giving advice”

Career questions

Career questions are questions that exaggerate and extrapolate beyond the young person’s present behaviour. They help the young person to recognize that they have choice about the direction in which they are heading and that this choice might lead to extremes of lifestyle. An example of a career question is: ‘What would it be like for you to make a career out of being an extremely high achiever who set an example for everybody else by giving up everything except study?’ This question raises the client’s awareness of a path or journey along which they can progress, if they wish. It enhances their ability to make choices to bring about change, at the current point in time, which might have long-term consequences.

Career questions have a level of paradoxical intent in that, it is hoped, ensuing discussion will result in satisfying behaviours which are not extreme. We need to be careful to use these questions with discretion or they may become self-fulfilling prophecies. Consider the question: ‘Would you like to continue your shop-lifting behaviour, take more risks, and move on to becoming a career criminal?’ This question would be useful for some young people, but for others might encourage them to follow the ‘suggested’ career.

Externalizing questions

These questions have their origins in Narrative therapy (White, 2007). Externalizing questions separate the problem, or central issue, from the person. By doing this, the client is able to feel that they can control their problem, or central issue, if they wish, because it is something external to them which can be controlled, rather than something inherent in them which cannot be controlled.

A good example of the use of an externalizing question relates to anger control where a counsellor might externalize the anger of a young person by saying: 'My impression is that your anger has control of you rather than you having control of it. How does your anger manage to trick you into letting it control you?'

Externalizing questions often lead to discussion about issues of control. Control issues are important for young people who are struggling with the desire to have more control of their lives but may be reluctant to accept responsibility for controlling their own behaviour. Externalizing questions are often followed up with exception-oriented questions to help promote change.

Exception-oriented questions

A number of useful types of question have their origin in Brief Solution-focused Therapy. These include exception-oriented questions, questions which exaggerate consequences, miracle questions, goal-oriented questions, scaling questions and questions which presuppose change (O'Connell, 2012).

Exception-oriented questions aim to promote change by drawing attention to times or situations where an undesirable behaviour does not occur. Examples of exception-oriented questions are:

'When do you not get angry?'

'When do you not get into arguments with your father?'

'In what situations do you have control of your impatience?'

Exception-oriented questions aim to help the young person discover that there are times and/or situations where they behave differently, and to recognize what it is that enables them to behave differently. Gaining understanding in this way allows them to recognize that they can take more control of their behaviour and/or their environment. By recognizing this, they may be able to make choices to bring about positive change.

“Discovering exceptions can lead to possibilities for change”

Questions which exaggerate consequences

Examples of this kind of question are:

- ‘How come things aren’t worse?’
- ‘What stopped total disaster from occurring?’
- ‘How did you avoid falling apart?’

These questions can be used to help a young person recognize that they have coped extremely well under adverse situations. These questions are aimed at encouraging the client to view their behaviour in a positive light and discover unrecognized strengths. Such questions can be extremely useful for young people who are unsure about how well they are coping with life.

Miracle questions

Miracle questions are used to help the client begin to find hypothetical solutions to the problems they are experiencing. Typical miracle questions are:

- ‘If a miracle happened and the problem was solved, what would you be doing differently?’
- ‘If things changed miraculously, what would life be like?’

This sort of question appeals to some young people because it lets them use their imagination to explore what would be different if their situation changed for the better.

As a result of thinking about ways in which things might change, they are likely to explore new ideas that might be useful in helping them to make changes.

Goal-oriented questions

Goal-oriented questions are direct questions and are similar in some ways to exception-oriented questions because they invite exploration of ways in which things could be different. They help young people to identify broad changes that they might like to make. In exploring how things could be different, goal-oriented questions invite the client to look ahead to the future. Examples of goal-oriented questions are:

- ‘What do you think your life would be like if you didn’t get angry?’
- ‘How would you know that you had resolved this problem?’
- ‘Can you tell me what your life would be like, and what sort of thing you would be doing, if you were no longer feeling miserable?’
- ‘If you had a particular goal that you wanted to achieve with regard to . . . , what would it be?’
- ‘How would you like things to be?’
- ‘When you think about . . . , can you identify any particular goals?’

Other goal-oriented questions identify perceived restraints, which in the young person's mind interfere with their ability to achieve particular goals. They help the client to identify ways to overcome these restraints. Examples are:

- 'What stops you from achieving your goal?'
- 'What would you need to do to achieve your goal?'

Scaling questions

Scaling questions have their origin in Brief Solution-focused Therapy. Scaling questions often lead into goal-oriented questions as they are related to goals. They help the young person to be specific when identifying and discussing goals. Examples of scaling questions are:

- 'On a scale of 1–10, 1 being hopelessly incompetent and 10 being really competent, where do you think you fit right now?'
- 'On the scale of 1–10, 1 being very depressed and 10 being ecstatically happy, where would you like to be in the future?'
- 'If 1 corresponded to being an honest and upright citizen and 10 corresponded to being a hardened criminal, where would you like to be?'

Scaling questions lead into goal-oriented questions. For example, the counsellor might ask: 'What will you need to do to reach this point on the scale?'

Questions which presuppose change

An example of a question which presupposes change is: 'What has been different or better since you last saw me?' This question presupposes that some change has occurred and may help a young person to identify things that have improved, so that they can feel good. Quite often, positive change goes unnoticed. For example, although there may have been fewer arguments during the week, the young person might not have recognized this. By using a question which presupposes change, the counsellor can bring the change which has occurred into focus and make small changes newsworthy, so that there is a recognition that improvement has begun. Once improvement has been identified, there is an incentive to make further improvement so that significant change can occur.

Challenging

There are a number of situations where counsellors need to challenge adolescent clients. Challenging needs to be done in a way that does not offend them but invites them to question what they have said, what they believe or what they are doing. In their peer relationships, young people are usually direct in challenging each other. Similarly, counsellors

need to be direct, but in a way which is not threatening to the young person's ego. Situations in which challenging might need to occur are:

- Where the young person has been talking about things in a way that is confusing because what they are saying is inconsistent or contradictory.
- Where the young person is engaging in behaviour which is inevitably self-destructive, but they are not recognizing this.
- When the young person is avoiding a basic issue which appears to be troubling them.
- Where a young person is excessively and inappropriately locked into talking about the past or the future and is unable to focus on the present.
- When a young person is going around in circles by repeating the same story over and over again.
- When the young person's non-verbal behaviour does not match their verbal behaviour.
- Where undesirable processes are occurring in the relationship between the client and counsellor; for example, where dependency or transference is occurring or where a client withdraws or shows hostility, anger or some other emotion towards the counsellor.
- Where the young person is failing to recognize possible serious consequences of their behaviour.
- When the client is out of touch with reality with regard to a specific situation, but is not exhibiting a mental health problem.

In situations such as these, counsellors may challenge their clients by sharing what they feel or are observing. A good way to challenge is to use the following process:

1. Reflect or give a brief summary of what the client has said so that the client feels heard and understood.
2. Possibly include a statement of the counsellor's own feelings at the time.
3. Make a concrete statement of what the counsellor has noticed or observed. This needs to be given without interpretation.

“Sensitivity is required when challenging”

Examples of challenging responses are:

‘You have just told me that . . . but I'm puzzled because I've noticed that several times you have briefly talked about your relationship with your sister and then have started to talk about something quite different.’

‘You have talked about your relationship with your mother. However I'm confused; you've told me that you care very much about your mother, but you have also said that you are deliberately planning to try to hurt her.’

Instructions

When counselling young people, there are a number of types of instruction which can be useful. When instructions are given, they need to be given in a way that is neither patronizing nor parentified or the young person is likely to be alienated. During a proactive counselling process counsellors select counselling strategies, as explained in Chapter 9, to facilitate the exploration of the young person's issues. When using these strategies, counsellors need to give instructions to implement the selected strategies and help structure the process. This means that at times they need to be directive.

Being directive

Before starting to give direct instructions related to the use of a particular strategy, the counsellor needs to give the young person a choice about whether or not to engage in the strategy concerned. In addition, the young person needs to be told that they have a choice about whether or not to do as directed. If these conditions are not met, the young client will be disempowered and, if the session continues, the client–counsellor relationship will be likely to deteriorate into a parental type of relationship. Negotiation about involvement in a particular process is essential to enable the young person to join co-operatively with the counsellor in accepting, or choosing not to accept, particular directions.

In being directive, the counsellor needs to give clear, concise instructions such as:

‘Tell me how you feel now.’

‘Tell me more.’

‘Tell your football coach how you really feel.’ [*in role play*]

‘I would like you to stand over here and imagine that you are your teacher.’ [*in role play*]

‘Change places and be your grandmother.’ [*in two-chair work*]

‘Choose a symbol to represent your disappointment.’ [*when choosing symbols*]

It is important for counsellors to monitor the outcomes of their directions. If a strategy is not working, the instructions and directions being used need to be modified. This might mean that a counsellor may need to abandon a strategy at a particular point.

The use of humour

Humour can be particularly useful when working with some young people as it can help to lighten the conversation. It is important for counsellors to be able to get in touch with their own internal adolescent and to use humour which is appropriate for the situation. Humour can be used directly to influence change as well as to create an easier climate.

In using humour to promote change, we can make use of paradoxical interventions. Paradoxical interventions have their origins in Strategic Family Therapy (Madanes, 1981, 1984). Frankl (1973) described paradoxical intervention as a technique to enable the client to develop a sense of detachment from their neurosis by laughing at it. By making a ridiculous suggestion the counsellor may encourage a young person to think creatively about new or alternative solutions to problems. For example, if a young person has been expressing anxiety about needing to achieve a very high standard in assignments, the counsellor might say in a deliberately humorous way: 'Well, maybe you should read your assignments through twenty times to make sure they are OK and then show them to half a dozen friends to get them to check and make suggestions, and then revise them before you hand them in'. Clearly, this approach should only be used with students where the counsellor has confidence that a positive outcome will be achieved.

Humour in counselling should never be hostile or derogatory. Young people themselves use humour by teasing, mimicking or acting out. These are clearly not suitable counsellor behaviours. The successful use of humour in counselling depends on sensible choice of content, and timing, with the counsellor being sensitive to the vulnerability of the young client. What may be amusing for one individual may not be for another.

KEY POINTS

- a wide variety of micro-counselling skills can be used to engage and join with the young person and to enable them to resolve issues and feel better
- observation can be used as an assessment tool in providing information about the young person with regard to mood, intellectual functioning, self-esteem, attitudes, beliefs, creativity and social influences
- it can be useful to match the young person's conversational style through the use of digression, self-disclosure, their vocabulary, representational style and the use of their metaphors
- a wide variety of questions and feedback statements can be used to energize the counselling interaction, engage the young person, and promote joining
- humour is particularly useful in helping to provide balance in the counselling conversation

FURTHER RESOURCES

'Quizlet' is an online study tool that provides, among other topics, resources to study counselling micro-skills. After checking out the micro-skills resources, perhaps you might like to explore other topics covered by 'Quizlet'?

- quizlet.com/9996625/counseling-micro-skills-flash-cards/