University Counselling Service

Guidelines for building effective helping relationships

There may be times when University staff are called on to offer advice or support to students. The following guidelines for establishing effective helping relationships may be useful to keep in mind:

Clarifying your role

It is helpful at the outset to clarify your role with a student so that they know what to expect. The purpose of your role, where and when you can meet, how and when they can contact you and the frequency and duration of your meetings are important to establish from the outset. Clarity about the limits of your role, such as the boundaries of confidentiality and your professional and personal boundaries can also be useful.

Establishing trust

In order to be as effective as possible a certain level of trust needs to be established in a working relationship. When the following qualities or core conditions are communicated it has been found trust is more likely to develop:

- Empathic understanding – the process of attempting to put yourself in the position of another in order to better understand their experience
- Acceptance – the acknowledgment of another without judgment.
- Genuineness or sincerity – the ability to be oneself openly and consistently in relationship with another.

These qualities can be communicated through the use of non-verbal and verbal active listening skills.

Active listening skills

The process of attending closely to what another person is saying and actively conveying your understanding or attempt to understand them can be a powerful method of helping someone explore and come to terms with their difficulties. Helping someone to communicate their problems can be more helpful and empowering than immediately offering advice and solutions, particularly where personal difficulties are concerned. The answers that people arrive at themselves are usually the right ones for them. Active listening skills are non-verbal and verbal communication skills which convey that you are really listening to the other person.
Non-verbal communication:

i. **Eye contact** – Steady, relaxed eye contact communicates attention very effectively rather than a fixed stare or shifting gaze.

ii. **Facial expression** – A relaxed, natural expression is best. If a smile is false or fixed it can be unsettling for a speaker if it does not feel genuine.

iii. **Voice** – Tone of voice and pitch are also important. Relaxed breathing can help you speak more slowly and clearly.

iv. **Gestures** – Fiddling or tapping may be distracting for a speaker and they may feel that the listener is not fully attending to them.

v. **Posture** – Well-balanced, open posture with the body turned towards the speaker can convey both attention and confidence.

vi. **Proximity, distance, height** – It is important to be aware of your preferences and to be sensitive to those of others. This may vary according to each individual and across cultures. A meeting place where chairs can be selected and moved to suit you both is preferable.

N.B. Remember that body language makes an impression on others and has an impact on you too. The more comfortable you feel in yourself, the more closely you will be able to attend to others and the more at ease they are likely to feel.

Verbal communication:

i. **Minimal encouraging**

This is the term used to describe those brief, encouraging noises we often make when listening to someone in order to let them know we are following without interrupting the flow of their conversation. e.g. "Uh-Huh..."; "Mmm..."; "Umh..." etc.

Non-verbal behaviour can also be modified to communicate attentiveness, e.g. nods of the head, eye contact, mirroring the speaker's posture, etc.

ii. **Reflection**

This is a way of mirroring what a person says in order to let them know that you have heard them accurately. It can involve paraphrasing the content of what they have been saying or feeling or emotions that you have detected behind the things they have actually told you.

iii. **Open-ended questions**

Closed questions are those that encourage "Yes" or "No" answers, e.g. "Are you feeling angry?" The speaker can feel as though they are being interrogated. Closed questions also suggest answers as though they are being invited to agree with your perception of the situation, as well as discouraging them from expanding once they have supplied an answer. Open questions, on the other hand, allow the speaker to explore issues more fully and do not suggest answers. Interrogatives such as "how" and "what" are particularly useful, e.g. "How are you feeling?" "What would you like to focus on?" Avoid using questions beginning with "why" as they can sound judgmental.

iv. **Summarising**

This is the process of drawing all that the other person has told you together and feeding it all back to them. It can be a good way of drawing a meeting to a close, repeating the main points to let the speaker know that you have been listening and have understood what they have been saying.
v. Challenging
This skill is used to confront inconsistencies in the speaker's thoughts, feelings and actions. E.g. A person may tell you that they like their course but they always arrive late. Challenging is the process of pointing out this lack of congruence.
To use this skill effectively the listener must be able to:
- Recognise his or her own feelings when the discrepancy occurs;
- State those feelings clearly to the speaker;
- Allow the speaker the opportunity to respond to that reaction.

Assessment
It may be useful to explore the issue that the student brings in more depth and to help them focus on specific areas. The process of actively listening to them and of communicating your understanding may allow them to gain a new perspective and see a way forward. Arriving at an agreement about a goal and clarifying areas of responsibility for you both, if appropriate, could be helpful during this process.

Empowering the student to take action
Ideally the process of helping the student in this way will empower them to take action themselves without the need for significant support. Suggestions and advice may be appropriate in some situations where they lack sufficient concrete information. However, it may be useful to remember that the more the helper takes control in this situation in terms of suggesting, advising, prescribing and taking action for the student, the less empowered the student becomes.

Referral
Part of the process of supporting a student may involve referring them to other services or departments either within or outwith the University. The University Counselling Service webpage has lists of internal and external resources which may be of assistance. There are also leaflets available on this website, including one: ‘How to use the Counselling Service for Referral and Consultancy’ which offers suggestions on how best to make referrals to the service.

Looking after yourself
Listening to and supporting students can be both rewarding and demanding. Attending to yourself and ensuring that you get support and rest and have things in your life that sustain you too is important in order to be able to support others on a regular basis. There is a leaflet, ‘Looking After Yourself’ on the Counselling Service website addressing this issue.

A full list of both internal and external support resources can be found on our website [www.abdn.ac.uk/counselling/links](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/counselling/links)