**Counselling Skills - Personal Development**

The *empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence* are very important (core conditions) when we are listening to others. I noticed when I am talking to someone, who does not care, does not accept me or pretending to be kind, it is not a pleasant experience. But when I talk to someone, who is caring, who is trying to understand me and does not judge me, it is a totally different feeling. Those who are accepting me and who are honest with me, they can make me feel valued, respected and accepted too. In addition, I am more able to build a trusting relationship with them; it helps me to connect with other people - and perhaps with myself - and to see my life from a different point of view. If I have any problem, then in this environment the solution for my problem can come naturally due to my experience, or at least I can feel better.

I noticed that we sometimes use counselling skills without thinking about them (yet, awareness can help). For example, I have a friend who I meet once a month, so there is always something new to talk about. I always tell her about my life and she honestly tells me her problems and how she feels. As I listen to her and accept her as she is, she sometimes cries and hopefully it helps her that there is someone who can listen to her. Probably, she would experience our meetings differently if I would not use some listening skills. Although she does not know anything about counselling, I feel better when I tell her my problems. However, sometimes she says "why do you not do this or that" or she is giving advice which I do not always like. But I accept her as she is. So generally, it is a good feeling when I can trust someone and there is someone who listens to me. So having this feeling in my mind, I am glad when other people are talking to me about their lives and about their problems, because I know that I can help them just by listening to them.

I have been practicing meditation for many years and I have been reading and working on my thoughts and feelings for some time. This helped me to change. My self-awareness has changed gradually. The Counselling Skills course also helped me. Yet, on the course, we practiced self-awareness while we were listening to each other. A lot of different feelings came up when I was listening others and I was trying to deal with them and to respond in a right way. Sometimes, I was very touched by the story I was told, which affected me emotionally. Because of these feelings and the thoughts that came up, sometimes it was difficult to focus.

On one occasion, I was wondering, how can someone be stressed about some tiny unimportant things. I was thinking for a moment that there are also things that are easy and enjoyable for others (e.g. driving), but they are difficult me. As I just realised this, I internally stopped judging the person and it helped me to pay attention to the person.

On another occasion, I realised that we have often similar experiences, but they are never the same. Although I know several things about a particular person, I can never feel as she feels. Her experience is her journey. But perhaps, we are all going somewhere. Maybe we are all going through the similar process (of self actualisation) of becoming someone, who we like more than the person who we are at the moment.

I noticed during the listening sessions that my self-awareness helps listening skills. It helps to deal with my feelings and thoughts. Some of my feelings and thoughts can distract my attention from the person I am listening. If I am getting occupied with my own feelings, I cannot entirely pay attention to the other person. Therefore, I am less able to respond and reflect her/his feelings. The lack of self awareness can affect me a number of different ways that goes against the effectiveness of my counselling skills. For example, I can get excited and stimulated by what I was told, so maybe I want to jump in before I am invited to have a response. In everyday life, sometimes I am impatient, so I cannot wait until other people finish what they want to say. Sometimes I think that I know what they want, or I do not agree with them. But recently, especially after my counselling courses, I try to be more aware of my feelings and I try to have more respect to others by not interrupting them while they are speaking. If I am less self-aware, it could be difficult to be empathic as well. Another issue with the lack of awareness could be that maybe I cannot recognise that I am identifying myself with the other person instead of being emphatic. Also, I should be careful not to make judgmental comments. But at the same time, I need to focus to be honest about my feelings. So I think, in general, self-awareness can help to apply the core conditions more effectively when we are listening to others. Even when we are genuine and we are communicating our feelings with others, we should do it mindfully and in an appropriate way. Sometimes when I talk to someone, I am just bursting to tell something. But during counselling it would be inappropriate to burst and to tell my story to a client.

Although it did not happen to me during my counselling course, sometimes I am getting irritated by some people for different reasons. Recently, I read a short writing from the Dalai Lama that matches my belief about why are we getting upset and annoyed by others. He said that everything that annoys me and I criticise in the other person, it is also present in myself. Everything that other people criticise on me - and I find it offending - are things that I have not got over yet. But, if they do not affect me, it is only their problem that they try to project on me.

As I am very sensitive I can often pick up other people's feelings. For example, if my mother is angry about something I can get angry about the same thing. In addition, I am getting angry with myself for letting myself being angry. In the future, I need to make more effort to recognise my own feelings that are generated or amplified by others. I need to be aware of my feelings and from where they came from in order be able to deal with them. I need to learn to put these feelings aside and focus on the feelings of others. As a result, I can understand and experience them without anger or frustration in order to be an effective helper.

I grew up in an environment where it was a norm for me not to express my feelings. As a result, I could not have a genuine relationship with other people. This caused me a lot of problems. However, gradually I started to be more aware of my feelings, I started accepting and expressing them. As Rogers (1961, p. 17) said "the curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change". It was not an easy process. When I finally managed to be connected with some amazing people, they also helped me to change. The same happened when I went to the Counselling Skills course. It has helped me to continue my process of self-acceptance.

I was a bit afraid that people will not understand me when I was talking about my life, and this made me a bit agitated. But as I felt accepted, it was easier to overcome this feeling. Also, I noticed that if I eventually decide to talk about my feelings, sometimes I am getting too anxious, I am less aware of myself, so I am not careful how I express myself. Nevertheless, as I am aware of this issue, so in the future, I can work on this to improve my communication. I am very glad that by studying counselling I can take new challenges and I have the opportunity to continue my self-development.

(Also, I feel very pleased that in this medicalised society where we live, I have the opportunity to study counselling, which is much closer to my beliefs than other approaches.)

Being and working in the group and listening to each other was an exceptional experience that helped me to see people in a slightly different way than in everyday life. I realised that we are all very different. We have different life experiences and different background, but all of us want to be accepted as we are. It seemed to me that even we did not know each other, we managed self-disclose and to accept each other.

### I learned when I am listening to others, we should give enough room for others. We should not redirect or breach the stream of the self-disclosure of the person we are listening. Also, we should start our session with the question "What do you want to talk about today?" or "Where do you want to start?" instead of narrowing the question to "What is the problem you want to talk about?". I should try not to interrupt the person and when I have an opportunity for reflection, sometimes "the less is more". It is often enough to reflect the client's feelings and the content in very few words instead of trying to make long sentences. After my observed listening session I received a feedback that I managed to respond correctly, however, maybe I missed some of my opportunities to reflect. However, it is not always easy to find the right moment and the right words to say when we are reflecting. I think we were all doing well, but we made some mistakes as well, such as stopping the person who is talking too early or the connection was lost. Nevertheless, by giving and receiving constructive criticism and feedback on our listening sessions we learned from each other.

I read some chapters from books and handouts as well. They have helped me to understand more about Rogers and about Person-Centred Counselling*.* For example, I read the first chapter of *First Steps in Counselling* from Pete Sanders, which was useful to understand the difference between counselling skills and professional counselling. We received a handout as well that helps to visualise these differences in a simple way.

(The Foundation in Counselling Theory course was also very helpful. It has helped me to gain some insight into different approaches in psychotherapy and provided some basic knowledge how counselling works.)

**References**

Rogers, C. 1961 *On Becoming a Person A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin

Sanders, P. 2011 *First Steps in Counselling* PCCS Books 2011