

Counselling Skills (ECCS6001)
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Skills Essay Assignment
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This essay reflects the contents of the Microsoft Teams skills session that took place and was recorded within Triad-B on 22-03-2021 at 20:18.

It was the last session of the evening and lasted 27 minutes and 9 seconds. The participant roles in the session were as follows: Counsellor - S.H., Client - C.M., Observer/Session recorder - C.U.

I have presented the essay in the same chronological order as the session took place, although I do refer back to previous moments in the session on occasion. When I do so I include an in-text time stamp denoting the prior moment I am referring to.

A time stamp in square brackets prior to a paragraph denotes the starting point of the particular section of the session I am referring to.

An in-text time stamp in rounded brackets denotes a specific moment within the session.

It should be noted that the client and myself had engaged in the same roles during a previous session. This is the reason I refer to our relationship as '*relatively new*' while contracting with the client.

Start of session

[00:25]

I welcome the client, but took a few moments before making eye contact with them. From a body language perspective, especially at the opening of the session, this was not ideal as the majority of person-to-person communication is non-verbal. Psychologist and Social Scientist Gerald Egan suggests the use of SOLER i.e. Sit squarely, Open posture, Lean towards the other, Good eye contact, Relaxed (Egan, 1994). As the session took place in the online setting the importance of minimal encouragers such as good eye contact and empathetic

head movements are more important than ever. Once I made eye contact, this plus the use of body language and minimal encouragers throughout the session was generally good. One thing I did notice is a tendency to look away when considering a question. Although I do this in day-to-day life, I feel it needs addressing in the counseling role as it may be construed as a lack of attentiveness by the client.

[00:33]

Having welcomed the client I outline the client-counsellor contract, focusing on the issues and limitations of confidentiality. It should be noted that limited scope of our particular student/student/teacher contract highlights only a small part of a much wider set of responsibilities and obligations utilized within the counseling profession. Psychotherapist Andrew Reeves refers to Charlotte Sills' book *Contracts In Counselling* when describing the necessity for such contracts, 'the therapeutic relationship, with its inevitable power imbalance and its capacity to arouse very deep and disturbing issues, is in particular need of structure and order to contain it. The contract helps to provide this structure' (Reeves, 2018).

[01:00]

I assure the client that if they wish to take a break or stop the session at any time that that is fine and they should let me know. Humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers deemed unconditional positive regard to be one of the three the core conditions; the other two being empathy and congruence. It is under these conditions that Rogers considered the client would encounter an environment where they feel safe enough to discover their own potential.

[01:11]

I begin the session with an Open Non-Leading question. This type of question encourages discussion without pointing the client in any particular direction and is very useful when gathering general information about a person or subject. The majority of questions I use during the session are Leading questions. This type of question is sometimes considered as seeking to influence the responder's answer. However due to the limited amount of time available I used this type of question to guide the subject of the conversation versus seeking to obtain a specific answer.

[01:20]

The client discusses her issues with anxiety and self-doubt, concerned that worrying about these issues unduly is causing her unneeded stress. I maintain nod my head empathetically (01:27) to assure the client that I am paying close attention.

[02:07]

I clarify what she has just discussed by the use of paraphrasing: *'Okay. So, I mean, the anxiety that you're feeling, and you just mentioned that later, on reflection, you can see what was worthy... I mean, is that right what you were saying? What was worthy of anxiety and what wasn't?*

When paraphrasing I could have been much clearer when repeating back my understanding of what the client had just discussed. When I say *'is that right what you were saying?'* It may not have been clear to the client that I was using the

word 'right' to confirm my understanding, as opposed to assigning a value judgment.

The client responds to my clarification in the affirmative. I then reiterate the last sentence of my own prior statement to ensure that the client and I are on the same page regarding her concerns over her perceived inability to effectively differentiate between situations that are worth getting stressed out over and the ones that are not at the time they are occurring. As she puts it: '*in the moment*'.

[02:30]

I ask the client an Open Leading question focusing on anything she may have found helpful in the past.

[02:39]

The client briefly discusses her previous struggles with Mindfulness then returns to the subject of her anxiety in relation to her thoughts and being in the moment.

Client: '*I can't rationalize my thoughts. They all get a bit much and I go into panic*'.

I nod in response to the client's use of the word struggle. The client makes eye contact with me (03:09) and I respond with a more pronounced nod.

I respond with another Open Leading question, asking the client if she could clarify what she means by '...they (her thoughts) get a bit much'.

[03:35]

The client describes the contents of her physical surroundings '*... I'm driving my car*', her feelings '*It just causes me a lot of dread and worry*', and what these things mean to her '*... something bad is going to happen*'. Again, I nod when the client makes eye contact (03:47).

Upon reflection this was a missed opportunity to reflect back to the client what counsellor Rebecca Midwinter describes as: '(the client's) content and feelings' surrounding her experience with driving and perhaps explore the meaning of those things mean to her (Midwinter and Dickson, 2015).

[04:55]

I ask a Closed Leading question whether she considers her experience when driving a solitary activity in order to discern whether being observed while taking part in an activity is a component of her anxiety.

Stephen: '*do you feel like if there's an audience or other people watching, is that a component of the anxiety that you have?*'

This question reveals an important point. Upon reviewing the recording, my question - examining driving as a solitary endeavor and it's contributing factor to the client's anxiety - is an example of where I slipped out of a 'client centered' focus and projected my own specific thoughts/experience regarding anxiety into the conversation. The client's preceding answer (03:35) contains no mention of

an audience or the idea of solitary vs. observed¹. By slipping out of the client's world for a moment I missed the opportunity to explore the point she did make about going places she knows vs. places she does not know.

[05:14]

The client confirms that the presence of an audience is a contributing factor towards her anxiety.

[06:19]

I paraphrase back to the client her improved comfort level when both driving and speaking on the phone alone. I then ask an Open Leading question regarding how long the client has been bothered by this problem.

[06:42]

The client reveals that she is more prone to keeping her issues to herself when her anxiety levels are increased, and that she believes that that within itself makes her anxiety worse.

[07:30]

I begin to pose a Closed Leading question: '*... do you ever speak with your friends about this stuff?*' and then stop myself and switch to a more open form of the same question 'Have you met other people who feel this way too?' I switched the type of question to allow for a more expansive answer.

07:45

The client responds that she has participated in some group work and found it 'refreshing' to hear other people sharing similar problems to her own. She then

¹ As previously mentioned, I had spoken with the client during a prior skills session and may well have subliminally brought this observation with me from that occasion.

returns to her initial concerns regarding her anxiety and self-doubt. I lean into the camera to emphasize that I am paying attention (08:30).

[09:01]

Having confirmed my understanding of her answer, I transition the conversation to a related, but potentially less difficult subject, with a Closed Question enquiring what the client does for a living. Upon reflection, I think that my transition was a little abrupt.

[09:01]

Upon the client's response about her job, I noticed she made more consistent eye contact and displayed a noticeable change in energy. I smiled at the client to reinforce the lighter tone of the question (09:05).

[10:18]

I respond to the client using Immediacy, thus drawing attention to my in-the-moment experience of her positive energy. I then tentatively present her with an Open Leading question, gently challenging her in regards to what I perceive to be a disparity between her previously expressed concerns around her work and her current in-the-moment body language and description. Midwinter refers to Immediacy, when used as a form of challenge, as a skill that 'bridges the gap between empathy... and confrontation (Carkhuff, 1969). She goes on to describe it as '... a way of holding up a mirror to the client to show him or her what you are seeing, hearing and thinking' (Midwinter and Dickson, 2015). As I am speaking the client reciprocates my reflection of her positive energy - my smiling and verbal encouragement (10:38) - with a smile herself.

[10:56]

As the client continues to describe her work experience I smile as she uses the word proud (11:07). The client uses a Metaphor as she briefly mentions her originally concerns '*I can kind of fight the little niggling voice in my head that's always like, "No, you're not good enough"*'. I shift in towards the camera and readjust my seating position as the client readjusts her thoughts thus mirroring her dialogue with my body language (11:33).

[12:25]

I ask the client a Closed Leading question focusing specifically on the client's metaphor ('niggling voice').

[13:00]

As part of her response the client says (14:42) '*But now, saying this to you, I can see that just me not smiling at someone for when we're just walking past for a few seconds probably won't have even crossed their mind*'. Thus, the process of gently challenging the client to explore her 'niggling voice' may have cast new light on its validity within the landscape of her inner dialogue. The client also mentions a formal anxiety diagnosis for the first time.

[15:05]

I ask the client a Closed Leading question whether she is comfortable discussing her anxiety diagnosis. I follow this with an Open Leading question on whether she would mind illuminating me on her specific experience surrounding her diagnosis.

15:28

Client explains her diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder and OCD.

[16:59]

With a short-term goal in mind, I ask the client a Closed Leading question referring back to earlier in the session (02:41) when the client mentioned having difficulty with Mindfulness. Rebecca Midwinter discusses the use of SMART goals (Smart, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timebound) as a useful tool when dealing with specific issues. 'The more defined the goals are easier to place within the SMART process (Midwinter and Dickson, 2015). In the client's case, her admittedly difficult relationship with Mindfulness may challenge some of the aforementioned SMART conditions. However, for instance, our later discussion of the use of exercise as a strategy for ameliorating the symptoms of her anxiety (18:21) appears far more achievable under the conditions set out by SMART.

[17:09]

The client's responds that her own version of mindfulness has indeed brought her some degree of relief. Continuing with minimal encouragers, I nod my head to empathize with the client's description of her prior difficulties with Mindfulness (17:17) and again (17:43).

[17:47]

I ask another Closed Leading question for clarification. Following the client's response I broach the subject of exercise (18:09) in the form of an Open question that I immediately change to a Closed Leading question. Upon reflection I should have left the question open. I close my eyes and scratch my head and look away.

This is less than ideal body language. Also, my choice of words ‘... calming down a little’ were not ideal.

[18:21]

The client acknowledges that exercise has been a significant help in the past, although she is finding it hard to do so currently due to her busy schedule. She also mentions that her anxieties have returned ‘with a vengeance’ with the advent of her new job.

[19:02]

I continue to challenge the client gently on the subject of exercise whilst acknowledging that I am not in her shoes schedule-wise, also offering non-verbal signs of empathy by smiling and placing my hand on my chest.

[19:21]

The client agrees that more exercise would be a good idea, and mentions that she has in fact been making the effort to exercise over the past few weeks and it has helped to clear her mind. I give her a big smile in (19:36) relating to the busy work schedule, followed by verbal encouragement (19:58).

[20:09]

I mentioned that research has shown the effectiveness of exercise in relieving stress. At this moment I feel I lose my connection with the client as I started relating her difficulties to abstract ideas such as research and scientific journals versus human experience. Thus, I was no longer available to her as present and ‘in the moment’

[21:11]

I offer verbal encouragement as confirmation of the effectiveness of the client's plan, verbally and physically, with smiles. I also mention that it was been proven that just speaking about how you feel aloud has been proven to help from a therapeutic perspective (Holmes, 2008).

[21:32]

The client speaks further about finding it easier to open up about her anxiety, even referring to the session in progress. *'I'm very open about my anxiety, which is probably why it's been easy to talk about it tonight'* (22:14). I interject my acknowledgement and appreciation of client's openness (22:24) and back it up with a smile to which the client reciprocated both physically and verbally.

[22:48]

I ask the client a Closed Leading question regarding whether her anxiety is improved since she was diagnosed. Following an affirmative response, I ask her an Open Leading question: *'(is there) anything you can hone in on'* specifically. Following the client's response that her job is a current cause of stress, and especially the fact that she has to go through an interview, we arrive at the place in the session where I feel the client and I connect the most successfully.

From (23:57 - 24:49) I am using a number of skills: Client metaphor, Mirroring, Challenging, and Reinforcement of previously mentioned short-term goals. The use of metaphor can be especially powerful, whether used by either client or counsellor, as it can paint a vivid picture for the listener in very few words. Person-Centered counselors Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne describe it thus, '...

metaphors often describe the quality and intensity of sensations more fully than single words or phrases (Mearns and Thorne, 2008).

[23:57]

The client uses a novel variation of a common metaphor to describe her difficulties when preparing for an event such as an interview: *'I know everyone gets stressed at interviews, but I just, again with the anxiety, I'll take it to the extreme where I won't sleep for days and I'll be so anxious that I can't even... Not revise for it, but prepare for it because anything I'm reading is just going in one eye, out the other'*

I respond by acknowledging the client's metaphor: *'That's an interesting... I've never heard that expression before'*.

Having responded by repeating the client's metaphor back to her the client and I have an important non-verbal exchange that lasts from (24:15 - 24:49). This is a powerful connective moment where the client smiles, then I return the smile, then the client smiles again. During this time you might say that we were playing empathic ping-pong, thus increasing the trust and strength of the client-counsellor bond.

Our conversation continues during the duration of the aforementioned non-verbal exchange:

Client: *'Right. If this is what is going to happen in my life, if this is what needs to happen then it'll happen.' So, I just need to be **more**, yeah, calm'.*

Focusing on the client's use of the word 'more' I take the opportunity to remind the client of the goals we had discussed earlier during the session.

Stephen: *'Bit **more** exercise'.*

Client: *'Yeah'*

Stephen: *'It's a bit **more** talking to your friends right?'*

Client: *'Yeah'*

During these two 'more' moments, I reiterated the previously discussed goals of trying to exercise a little more and reach out to her friends a little more in a somewhat bold manner. Coming immediately after our shared humor at her 'in one eye and out the other' metaphor this approach seemed natural and in the moment. Also, when observing the client's smile and open body language, she appears more relaxed and accepting of this reminder of the short-term goals we had discussed previously vs. when I had used a far less personal approach (quoting scientific research) to reinforce the idea of exercise earlier in the session (20:09).

[24:55]

After confirming the goals with the client, I continue with a metaphor of my own:

'So, perhaps really sort of putting a tick mark in your sort of mind...' (25:15)

However, re-watching this part of the session (beginning at 24:55) my comment feels like an unnecessary attempt at reinforcing the aforementioned short-term goals one more time. Looking back I think the client perceived this as a set of instructions (vs. the earlier more successful moment where empathy was all that was required).

25:42

We finished the session with my providing the client with a brief summary of the key points of the session. Counsellor Francesca Inskipp describes one of the main goals of summarizing as ‘... (to) bring out the main focus as you (the counsellor) sees it’ (Feltham and Horton, 2012). I focus on the apparent difference between the level of confidence the client displayed via her body language when describing her job vs. when imparting her experience verbally alone, then suggest that we might want to pick up on that disparity in the next session. I also revisited her positive experiences with both exercise and maintaining regular contact with her friends when combating anxiety as short-term goals in preparation for her upcoming interview. We finished up with my offering her strong verbal encouragement as to her awareness of these behaviours as they pertained to her issues. We ended the session by confirmed that we would be seeing each other again the following week.

Reviewing the summary I feel it was incomplete in that I did not mention her anxiety specifically. Also, my choice of language may have been too assertive

when suggesting discussing the short-term goals, thus unbalancing our relationship. I did however feel like I returned her sense of autonomy at (26:37) *'... perhaps we can have some more conversations if you're comfortable doing that'* before we rounded up the session.

CONCLUSION

I feel the most valuable lesson learnt from observing this recording is the importance of differentiating between one's own pre-conceived ideas during a session versus being truly present and in the moment for the client. I chose this particular recorded session because there are examples of both included herein. For example: the introduction of potentially personal agendas (18:09 - Goals) and/or of one's own issues (04:55 - Driving), whether conscious or not, are apparent in their limitations vs. the benefits of true empathic connection in the service of the client (24:15 - Metaphor)².

² But, when the therapist does understand how it truly feels to be in another person's world, without wanting or trying to analyze or judge it, then the therapist and the client can truly blossom and grow in that climate – Carl Rogers (Cortland, 2021).

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