Attending skills

Preamble

The effectiveness of all that we do is determined by our attentiveness. Our attentiveness links us to the external world. If we are non-attentive we miss things that we should see and hear, and therefore make poor choices from limited or distorted facts. We miss cues that lead to opportunities. We miss signals that lead to danger. In what follows, we consider the notion of attending under three broad headings—‘contextual’ attending, ‘postural’ attending, and ‘psychological’ attending. All three impact on some aspect of the way we relate to people and events.

Contextual attending

All events occur in a context. The effectiveness of any event is influenced by the attention given to contextual arrangements. There are five broad factors to be addressed by those who offer services to others. They are: (1) engage purposefully—to explore the appropriateness of the particular service to potential clients’ needs, and mutually agree on the next step; (2) furnish functionally—to ensure that the setting is appropriate for the service offered; (3) prepare personally—to ensure that ‘all is ready’ before engaging formally with clients; (4) welcome effectively—so that clients can locate the service and feel at ease; and (5) contract clearly—so that mutual expectations are clear and boundaries are set. In the discussion below, the emphasis is given to the counselling application, but examples of general application of the five factors are mentioned.

Engage purposefully

The purpose of the counsellor engaging with potential clients, in the first instance, is to mutually determine the appropriateness of establishing the counselling process, and to clarify the nature and scope of services undertaken. Differences in engaging with ‘voluntary’, ‘involuntary’ and ‘impossible’ clients are discussed below.

Voluntary clients

Voluntary clients are those who seek assistance on their own initiative. Even so, it is not necessarily easy for clients to decide to seek counselling help. The decision to seek help is often only taken after long discussions with trusted friends or workmates have failed...
to resolve some disturbing aspect of their life. The big question for them is whether or not a counsellor can do any better! In enquiring about an appointment, a potential client’s underlying purpose is to ‘suss out’ the cost benefit of paying to talk to a stranger. The quality of personal attentiveness given to their enquiry will help them decide whether or not to become involved. They need to be confident that they are talking to an authentic, caring person who both ‘understands’ them, and ‘knows their stuff’. For this reason, it seems preferred for enquirers to speak directly to the counsellor concerned (rather than an assistant) wherever possible. The purpose of such discussion is twofold. Both parties are able to seek, and give, specific information.

During the discussion, the counsellor will interact responsively (see Chapter 9) to a request for help in order to: (1) assess whether or not counselling is the appropriate service, and if so; (2) discuss whether or not a colleague of the opposite gender to the counsellor might be more beneficial to, or preferred by, the particular client; (3) determine possible appointment times that best suit the client’s circumstances; (4) note the client’s name (including how they prefer to be addressed), address and contact details; and (5) suggest an appropriate referral if counselling is not appropriate.

In the same exchange, the client will need to know: (1) how the counsellor ‘sees’ clients, and what the client can expect from the counsellor; (2) the fees involved and payment methods; (3) an agreed appointment time (if by now they wish to proceed); and (4) the address of the office, parking arrangements, or public transport details (means, route, and stop number), access points to building; and if applicable; (5) out of hours availability, and how to gain entry after hours; and (6) whether or not child minding is available, whether lifts are installed or stairs need to be negotiated—and any other contingency that occurs to either party. Before closing the initial call, the counsellor should indicate that confirmation of the appointment, and an enclosed map, will be forwarded by post.

Follow up notice
A follow up notice to clients has value on three fronts. Firstly, it is a courtesy to ensure that clients can recall the counsellor’s name, details of their appointment time, and other administrative matters. Secondly, a reiteration of the counsellor’s approach gives clients a chance to reflect on the process, and raise any concerns with the counsellor before proceeding with the first appointment. Thirdly, it tends to encourage responsible behaviour by indicating that a financial penalty could apply, under certain conditions, for failing to give notice of cancellation. A sample letter is shown below. Feel free to modify it to suit your needs.

The chapter continues and the sample resumes at page 123.

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The next step

It is important to have an appreciation of the elements of attending before beginning to practice them. Their significance is reinforced by both one’s internal experience, and the feedback of learner colleagues during practice sessions. The training method is discussed immediately after the notion of psychological attending has been considered.

Psychological attending

Psychological attending occurs when a sense of ‘one-ness’ is experienced between those involved. Such attentiveness enhances relationships with significant others, but is not usual (or necessary) in most day to day interactions. Counsellors need to have appropriate caring values, and adequate skills, to enable them to engage clients with a degree of intimacy that observers can recognise as evidence of being visibly ‘attuned’.

Psychological attending is what counsellors strive for. It is characterised by both parties being conscious of an intimate ‘with-ness’. Psychological attending can be observed by noting the congruity of ‘presence’ between counsellor and client when, for example, mutual smiles appear, or tears well up—both triggered from the world of the client.

The skills of contextual attending and postural attending both contribute to psychological attending, but it is the innate personhood of the counsellor that determines its quality. Many of the enabling counsellor qualities were discussed in Chapter 3, but it is timely to discuss ways of managing the inevitable personal distractions that may inhibit psychological attentiveness from time to time.

The ideal mindset to have in the moments of preparing for the next client is one of ‘emptiness’. Preoccupations need to be suspended in order to be fully focussed on the client’s world. We have found that creating a simple personal mantra is helpful in this regard. We use: ‘In this moment, I empty myself of all but love for—(and name client sub-vocally)’ or ‘I choose to be fully here for…’. A friend uses: ‘I seek to be a channel of the healing Cosmos for…’. We encourage learners to find their own words or visualisations that effectively ‘still’ them.

Some preoccupations or agendas are so over-riding that they need to be dealt with before effective work can occur. On these occasions it is helpful to attend and respond to oneself in order to explore and resolve issues—or be comfortable with them being ‘on hold’. Sometimes it is wiser to seek the counsel of a trusted colleague.

We have noticed that some learners, with a tendency to be perfectionists, have difficulty in achieving ‘emptiness’. They are so keen to ‘do things right’ that their ‘inner critic’ maintains their focus on their own performance rather on their client. This may be dealt with by discussion, but frequently highlights an historical event that needs to be explored and dealt with. The paradox of psychological attending is that you matter most when you have no personal need to matter.

Practicing attending

Before the first practice session begins, the coach will introduce themselves; orient the work group to their work area; give each learner the chance to introduce themselves and share some comment about themselves. The group will develop a set of ‘norms’ to determine how the group will function. Then the work begins.
General approach to training
The general approach to training outlined in this section applies to most skills addressed in this text. The group structure and training roles described below will apply as each new skill is considered chapter by chapter. Minor variations in approach will be discussed when required. Readers are reminded that the skills are taught, and function, cumulatively. A degree of mastery is required of each before the next skill is tackled.

In the training programs that we have conducted, participants have been allocated to ‘small’ practice groups. Group size should not exceed the ideal number of ten people—nine ‘new’ learners and a tutor. All are learners. The tutor’s tasks are to: (1) facilitate a full understanding of the theoretical material presented in the plenary session prior to the practice session; (2) demonstrate what is required to perform the skill to be practiced; (3) provide structured, systematic, individual practice so that individual learners are able to integrate theory with practice; (4) apply both responsive and initiative skills when coaching learners; (5) discern when to monitor rather than coach so that learners can gain confidence before moving on; and (6) learn from their learners so that training procedures can be progressively enhanced. Wise trainers—‘old’ learners—value this source of learning above all others.

New learners engage in three roles initially, and progressively adopt a fourth. The roles are: ‘counsellor’, ‘client’, and ‘observer’. As proficiency increases, learners grow into the ‘coach’ role. The tutor normally acts as coach until proficiency is achieved. Once skills mastery is achieved, there is very little need for supervision (in a process sense)—learners who have learned to coach others become able to supervise themselves!

In the client role learners are asked to be authentic. Their task is to be ‘real’—not to role-play some person or situation that they know about, nor discuss an issue that they have already resolved. Their task is to experience the impact of the skill being practiced by the ‘counsellor’, and give them specific feedback on the effectiveness, or otherwise, of their effort. In this role, clients learn first hand ‘what works’.

The counsellor is in the ‘hot seat’. Their task is to apply all skills learned to date—with specific focus on the new skill just presented. In this way the cumulative links between each skill are progressively applied more naturally. After each practice round, the coach ensures that the counsellor is given first opportunity to assess their effort before receiving feedback from the client. The observers, and the coach then give feedback to the counsellor, in that order. Counsellors seem more receptive to feedback from others after they have assessed their own performance.

The observers note what is happening while others are practising. They assess how well the practice meets the requirements, and give the counsellor feedback accordingly.

The coach monitors what happens throughout the practice, and in the giving and receiving of feedback. The coach will give feedback to cover the gaps that were not spotted by any of the learners, make any appropriate teaching points, verbally reinforce what was successful in the practice, and verbally contract with the counsellor about areas that need a coaching ‘push’ in an immediate follow on, or in the next round.

A typical practice round in postural attending

The preparation
Each skill is introduced in a plenary session where the presenter: (1) facilitates a review of learners’ current awareness of attending; (2) builds on the learners’ ‘picture’ with an
expanded, general overview to cover the ‘full picture’ of attending skills; (3) presents details of the ‘how’ steps to master the attending skills—including a demonstration; and (4) outlines the exercise process that will follow. These are the first four of Carkhuff’s ‘ROPES’ teaching strategy referred to in the introduction to Part two. After the practice exercise session that follows has concluded, learners will write a summary of their learning, in their own words. These summaries are the fifth step in ROPES. The presentation following attending—on observing—will again summarise the functions of attending to highlight the cumulative link between attending and observing. This principle, that a summary of the previous skill introduces the next new skill, applies throughout.

**The training room set-up**

The typical small group training room is arranged as illustrated in Figure 15 below. Note that the whiteboard is directly behind the client chair. This enables the counsellor to be squared off to any cues that may be listed on the board to assist early in the practice round. The counsellor, client and tutor/coach sit in the chairs 1, 2 and 3 respectively during actual practice. The people acting as client and counsellor will sit in the spare chairs (4) during ‘board-work’—not in their ‘work’ chairs. Observers sit in the unnumbered chairs.

![Figure 15. Showing the floor plan for a typical laboratory practice session.](image)

**The practice session**

Before actual practice starts, the tutor will lead a brief discussion to have the five key elements of postural attending recalled, and listed on the whiteboard so that the practicing counsellor can clearly see what is written up: (1) square off; (2) maintain eye contact; (3) lean forwards; (4) adjust distance; and (5) avoid distractions.

Before the practice session starts, tutors will have observed the natural attending behaviours of members of their practice group in order to identify those participants who are already comfortable with the attentive posture. The tutor invites one of these students to act as client so that the tutor can model what the counsellor does. When the task is clear, another naturally attentive person will be invited to ‘have a go’, in the counsellor role, in the first learner practice round. This step avoids early expression of objection, or even scepticism, that could otherwise occur if, say, a low-functioning or sceptical participant went first.

The tutor reminds the group that the counsellor is to attend to the client, in silence, for twenty seconds in a way that embodies the elements listed on the board. The client is to authentically experience being attended to, and give feedback on its impact. The
observers are to note how well the elements were integrated, and whether they saw any evidence of psychological attending.

Practice proceeds, and the tutor calls ‘time’ after 20 seconds. The counsellor then comments on their experience and critiques their own effort. The client then gives feedback to the counsellor. This feedback needs to be specific. For example, ‘I felt a sense of connection, after a while, as if you cared for me—it made me want to talk to you even though we are not supposed to—it changed a bit towards the end though—when you looked at the tutor—as if you were wondering about the time’. This provides opportunity for the counsellor to assess a match between internal experience and external impact, and for the tutor to make any teaching points. Specific feedback is much more useful than non-specific feedback such as: ‘I thought you did pretty well—especially in the middle’. Observers then give specific feedback to the counsellor—some of which may tail off into hypotheses about how this would not work in situations A, B and C. The tutor will discourage such discussion, and focus on the reality of what is currently occurring. The emphasis is on learning from the experiential evidence created in the room. The tutor will then give their feedback. The tutor, as coach, may also invite the counsellor to ‘have another go’, and give specific instructions on what to do differently—in the hope that the client’s feedback will indicate that they experienced the counsellor’s increased care, availability and potency.

When round one is concluded, the counsellor shifts to the client chair, and a volunteer moves to the counsellor chair. If the volunteer vacates a chair that is in a better position to more fully observe the interaction, an observer, who is the least squared off to the ‘action’, should shift into the vacant chair. The client in the tutor’s demonstration, and the first participant’s round, acts as observer until all other participants have acted as counsellor and client. The participant who acted as client in the tutor’s demonstration (the very first round) is the last person to act as counsellor.

To conclude the session, participants discuss what has been learned, together with ideas about application of the principles to other areas—such as attending to learning materials, visual display units and others. Before closure, learners are invited to document their individual summaries of their understanding (see page 129).

Summary

What attending is
Attending is the skill of creating a climate that assists concentration and facilitates involvement:

- **contextually** by preparing for constructive engagement and arranging the setting to suit the task;
- **posturally** by the way one’s body is positioned;
- **psychologically** by focussing undistracted, caring energy.

What attending does
Effective attending:

- communicates interest;
- involves others;
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- sets a climate of attention and respect;
- motivates self-expression in others;
- assists concentration;
- establishes a base for constructive exchange;
- generates confidence and self-confidence;
- prepares one to access information accurately.

Why attending is important
If one creates an attentive climate, then the basis for a constructive interchange of information is established, so that the task at hand is addressed more effectively.

When attending is used
Attending skills are used whenever one wants to:
- become involved;
- involve others;
- communicate interest;
- create a facilitative learning climate;
- begin to solve problems;
- present with confidence.

How to attend
The skill steps which lead to effective contextual attending are to:
- ensure setting is comfortable and attractive;
- ensure furniture is functional for the task;
- make setting ‘identifiable’ by using signs to find it, and décor to identify with;
- avoid interruptions and distractions.

The skill steps which lead to effective postural attending are to:
- square off;
- maintain eye contact (naturally, not staring);
- lean forward (ideal 30–45 degrees);
- adjust distance (ideal is 60–120 cm or 2–4 feet between eyes);
- avoid distracting behaviours.

The skill steps which lead to effective psychological attending are to:
- attend contextually;
- attend behaviourally;
- suspend own values and preconceived ideas;
- ‘still’ inner distractions;
- actively focus attention.
When all aspects of attending are skilfully executed in an interpersonal situation, an observer is able to note congruity of expression between the attendee and attender. The attending skills can be applied in a wide variety of settings including attending to learning materials, Visual Display Units and to others in telephone dialogue.

References


