Responding skills

Preamble

The previous three chapters on attending, observing and listening, have focused on effective ways of taking in information. This chapter discusses what to do with such information—how to respond to what has been seen and heard. The chapter builds on the overview of the responding skills given on page 97, and discusses the range of alternative responses that can be made to other people’s information. Some such responses are unhelpful and stifle constructive dialogue. Others are helpful and facilitate constructive dialogue. Before proceeding to describe these differences, and consider their application, it seems useful to recall the historical context in which the skill steps were developed.

The overview on page 97 highlighted the fact that empathy is the dominant quality of helpful responses. Carl Rogers was the first person to emphasise the value and function of empathic responses. His influential primers, (1942, 1951, 1961) described what constituted helpfulness, but he left learners to translate his conceptual definitions into skilled responses. We were among untold numbers of students and practitioners who spent years trying to work out the best way to ‘do’ what Rogers said was required to express empathy—‘to sense the client’s inner world of private personal meanings as if they were your own, but without losing the ‘as if’ quality’ (Rogers 1962, p. 419). Rogers believed that (together with counsellor ‘genuineness’ and ‘unconditional positive regard’) empathic responses were both necessary and sufficient for clients to gain the necessary insights required to deal with troubling issues (see page 14).

The work of Carkhuff and Berenson (introduced on page 18) made it clear that empathic responses were certainly necessary, but not sufficient. In defining the helping process, they showed how the responsive skills were sequenced in relation to the necessary pre-helping, personalising, and initiating skills (Carkhuff & Berenson 1976). Carkhuff and Berenson demystified the counselling process by: (1) defining the discrete skills involved in each phase of the process; (2) describing the attributes that characterise each skill; and (3) detailing the steps required to acquire each skill. Carkhuff also developed a five point scale to discriminate relative differences in effectiveness between responses at different phases of the helping process.

We note that subsequent writers of training texts, such as Nelson-Jones (1992), Geldard and Geldard (2001) and Egan (1998), have failed to incorporate the precision and
breadth of Carkhuff’s work. Their failure to provide discernable standards, or, in some cases, workable descriptions of skill steps, leaves committed learners as powerless as those who struggled to follow Rogers’ lead fifty odd years ago. Without the means to discriminate differences in the quality of discrete, tangible skills, practitioners remain dependent on external supervisors to assess their effectiveness—albeit by no better measure than ‘experienced based opinion’. With such means, practitioners are well able to monitor, assess, and, where necessary, correct their work as it occurs during practice—they have the tools to be their own supervisors.

For us the challenge has been twofold. The first task was to acquire and master the tools that Carkhuff and Berenson taught us. The second was to reflect on the application of the skills in the counselling setting, with a view to honing, or modifying, them in ways that enhance their effectiveness for counselling clients.

The primary focus of this chapter is to provide an annotated description of the prototype responding skills developed by Carkhuff and Berenson (Carkhuff 2000, 2000a, 2000b) together with some extensions of our own. The chapter includes an exercise to establish a learning baseline; ways of discriminating differences between responses; and discussion of the function of the different levels of responses, their attributes, the skills steps required to produce them, and their applications. Pencil and paper exercises are provided, and suggested practice procedures outlined.

Chapter 10 will further discuss some additional refinements of the responding skills that we have shown to be particularly useful in professional counselling.

**Reviewing current competence**

Readers who have undertaken a regular training program may have completed two simple exercises at the very start of the program. The first is a ‘communication’ exercise that indicates the quality of the participant’s current responses to other people’s statements. The second is a ‘discrimination’ exercise that indicates how they discern different levels of effectiveness in a sample of possible responses to the same statement.

Readers not currently involved in training are invited to do similar exercises, in Appendix III on page 484. The instructions are listed on the fronts of both exercises. The exercises will be redone when the skills of this chapter have been learned. By then, readers will be equipped to rate their own work, and assess gains made between their ‘pre’ and ‘post’ efforts.

**Discriminating response effectiveness**

It is important to be able to discriminate the different levels of effectiveness of verbal responses so that we: (1) have a basic template to assist in the construction of responses; (2) can monitor our own effectiveness during practice or work sessions; and (3) assess the effectiveness of others from whom we may seek personal services.

There are seven different ways to respond to an initial statement. Four of them are deemed to be ‘reactive’ because, in different ways, the listener ‘reacts’ to what the speaker said from their own (the listener’s) point of view. Such responses retard exploration. The other three ways are deemed to be ‘responsive’ because, in varying degrees, the listener ‘responds’, with different levels of empathy, to what the speaker said. Such responses facilitate exploration. The seven ways of responding can be
graded on a scale between 1 and 3. The scale reflects the level of empathy shown by the responding listener. The significance of this is that a number of client outcomes can be predicted from the level of empathy shown. They are: (1) how understood the client feels; (2) how willing the client is to continue to talk; (3) how effectively the client is enabled to explore; and (4) how credible the counsellor is seen to be.

Consider the differences between the following seven counsellor responses made to this client statement.

‘God! Who do think you are? Call your self a counsellor? I’m sitting here spilling my guts, and all you do is sit and look at the clock. Why don’t you bloody well listen?’

**Response 1: Negation**

‘Well, as a matter of fact, I’ve actually let you work on into my lunch break.’

**Comment:** In this response, the counsellor **reacts** entirely from their own frame of reference. It has no empathic connection whatsoever with the client’s remark. It therefore rates at level 1.0 on the scale on page 197. Level 1.0 responses are discernible because they dismiss, deny, judge, or ignore what the client has said—in essence they negate the client’s ‘current truth’. The example given sounds quite patronising, but even a warmer sounding response such as, ‘I understand how you feel’, would also be rated at level 1.0 because it fails to demonstrate overt empathy. It fails to name a feeling. In that sense it ignores the client’s remark. It gives the client grounds to say; ‘Pigs you do! How would you know?’. It is predictable that clients subjected to level 1.0 responses will feel negated—misunderstood, dismissed or judged. They will not wish to talk further. If, from courtesy, they do talk, they are most unlikely to discuss personal issues in depth.

**Response 2: Reassurance**

‘It’s been useful for you to confront me like this. You should be pleased that you are able to assert yourself so well.’

**Comment:** In this response, the counsellor **reacts** from their own frame of reference. The reassurance offered is a ‘professional viewpoint’ that is deemed to be helpful, but is no more than an indirectly related ‘allusion’ to the client’s remark. The response communicates random, partial empathy only, and rates at level 1.5. The tendency to be reassuring is common in people who believe in ‘being positive’ (regardless of evidence to the contrary). They may also consider it to be a supportive strategy in the face of loss, hardship or danger. It is predictable, however, that clients will tend to doubt unrealistic assurances, and question the sincerity, or the efficacy, of what may seem to be a bit glib.

**Response 3: Random initiative**

‘I think it would be helpful for you to find better ways of communicating. When you feel emotional, just count to ten, cool off a bit, and perhaps say something like: I’m a bit unhappy, I’d like to give you some feedback.’

**Comment:** In this response, the counsellor also **reacts** from their ‘expert’ frame of reference, by offering a random initiative that alludes to a solution for an implied problem. Any empathic connection with the client is ‘oblique’, and so is rated at level 1.5. The tendency to offer premature advice on how to act in given situations is very common in people who like to ‘fix’ things—‘If I were you, I would …’. There is evidence to suggest that, on average, only one in five random, premature initiatives may have some merit. This differs markedly from selected initiatives that are likely to work almost every time—once a specific goal has been identified. It is predictable that clients get
diverted from the task of exploring their issue by premature, randomly suggested initiatives. They may acknowledge that one in five (on average) initiatives could work, but they are likely to have thought of, and dismissed, the other four ‘helpful’ suggestions that were offered. Level 1.5 initiatives are inefficient, and disempower clients who feel as if they are being pushed to go where they neither want nor need to be.

**Response 4: ‘Irrelevant’ questions**

‘Could you tell me, specifically, what your thought processes were just before you spoke out in the way you did?’

**Comment:** In this response, the counsellor also reacts from their own frame of reference, but seeks specific information that they, themselves, have some reason to seek. In the example, the inference is that the counsellor is an expert who, with sufficient information, can analyse it, and come up with a ‘professional’ prescription that is intended to be helpful. Such questioning has little empathic connection to the client’s remark. Such allusive responses are also rated at level 1.5. The tendency to ‘diagnose and prescribe’ on somebody else’s behalf is not uncommon in the general population. Readers may well have experienced the earnest probes of people who want to know ‘all about it’ so that they can help. It is predictable that clients subjected to a series of such questions feel increasingly resistant to, and disempowered by, the approach. They tend to think, if not say: ‘What do they want to know that for? Where is all this going? What has that got to do with what I’m saying?’.

‘Relevant’ questions certainly have their place. They work best when selectively applied to determine the best course of action to achieve an acknowledged goal. For example each time you visit the doctor, both you and the doctor have an agreed goal—to determine the nature of the current ailment. The doctor knows what to ask—and why.

Examples of levels 2.0, 2.5, and 3.0 follow, with practice exercises.

The next snippet introduces the first skill step to respond at level 2.0
The structure of empathic responses

This section will list the purpose of each of the three kinds of empathic responses that were rated in the Carkhuff scale at levels 2.0, 2.5 and 3.0, and detail the skill steps necessary to ensure that specific attributes are included.

Level 2.0: Responding to meaning

The purpose of level 2.0 responses

Level 2.0 responses communicate an understanding of the ‘essence’ of what a person means by what they have said. Such responses condense what was said to enhance its clarity and communicate its accuracy without loss of meaning. Level 2.0 responses are intellectual summaries. They have broad applications in a wide variety of settings. However, they are less preferred than levels 2.5 and 3.0 in the first phase of counselling, because the absence of an emotional component tends to limit further exploratory discussion. For that reason they should be used sparingly, if at all, in phase one.

The skill steps for level 2.0 responses

A number of factors need to be considered when constructing level 2.0 responses. Not all responses will necessarily incorporate all factors, but an awareness of them makes it easier to tailor appropriate responses for given situations. An asterisk in the following list indicates the factors covered in Carkhuff’s current training publications (Carkhuff 2000a, p. 49; 2000b, pp. 42–54). The remainder have occurred to us through time. Responses need not be developed in the sequence listed below.

1. *be succinct—to communicate efficiently;
2. *be specific—to avoid meaningless generalisations, confusion, or ambiguity;
3. be comprehensive—to incorporate all salient points (if desirable);
4. *be non-judgemental—to avoid wrong interpretations and false conclusions;
5. use appropriate lead-ins—to assist conversational flow;
6. clarify uncertainty—to avoid misunderstanding;
7. order jumble—to add clarity;
8. *use language that clients understand—to enhance clarity;
9. *test the accuracy of the response—to ‘stay on track’.

Each factor will be discussed, below, to consider contextual and related factors, provide examples where appropriate, and list the skill steps involved.

Be succinct

Succinct responses are generally more acceptable to others than long-winded, reiterative statements. However, the terms ‘reflective listening’ and ‘mirroring’ that were used, historically, to describe the notion of responding, suggested the verbal equivalent of the visual ‘mirror image’, and so some people literally repeated back what was said. This ineffective strategy was soon dubbed ‘parroting’—for the obvious reason. The call now from various writers is to be brief, concise, or succinct. Remember—only galahs parrot!

The skill required is the ability to paraphrase information succinctly without loss of meaning—in short, to make a précis. When used as a verb the word ‘précis’ means to ‘cut short’—to be precise—which, in turn, means ‘abridged, strictly expressed, exactly defined’ (Oxford). Other skills combine to ensure that ‘meaning’ is not compromised by the desire to be brief.
**Be specific**

Responses that are specific avoid confusion and pointless generalisations, and communicate concrete, unambiguous meaning. They give precision to the paraphrase. However, it is possible to construct responses that are: (1) specific, but omit some salient points, and (2) specific, and include most salient points. To discriminate this difference we call the first type a ‘segmental’ response, and the second type a ‘comprehensive’ response. The distinction is useful, but not precise because judgements about what is salient, and what is not, will vary between different people.

**The skill step** for identifying the ‘specifics’ in any information is to use the 5WH strategy that was previously described on page 179. Examples of specific, segmental and comprehensive responses will be made to a statement that Carkhuff attributed to a student. The bracketed notes identify the different 5WH elements within the statement (Carkhuff 2000, pp. 101–102). We have slightly modified the statement to read:

‘I thought I was on track with the teacher (who)—but I just failed an important test (what). I suppose we were on different wavelengths (why), and I didn’t do enough study (how) at home (where) before for the test (when)—but I didn’t expect the questions to be so hard (why).’

**Specific but segmental**

In paraphrasing a response, Carkhuff, specifies points about the student’s behaviour in relation to both the teacher and the student’s studies. His example is:

‘In other words, you overestimated where you were with the teacher and with your subjects’ (Carkhuff 2000, p.102).

This is a specific but segmental response. The value of such a response is that the student has evidence that s/he has been ‘heard’, and intellectually understood.

**Specific and comprehensive**

The following is a example of a specific and comprehensive response.

‘So, in other words, you failed because you overestimated where you stood with the teacher and the subject, and you underestimated the study requirements.’

**The skill step** to make a specific response more comprehensive is to include as many additional 5WH elements as deemed desirable to express the meaning without losing succinctness, or comprehensibility.

**Comparing segmental and comprehensive examples**

The first difference to note between the segmental and comprehensive responses is that the former focuses on aspects of why the student failed, but does not respond, overtly, to the salient point that the student failed. In the flow of general dialogue, such failure would be generally understood by both people concerned, but in a counselling context, its specific inclusion has value in that the reality of failure is more ‘up front’ and therefore more ‘available’ for reflection and discussion.

A second difference is that the segmental response only specifies the tendency to overestimate, whereas the latter also includes underestimation. Whilst this addition might seem a bit pedantic in general discussion, it has merit in a counselling setting because it gives the student opportunity to reflect more fully on how they actually make judgements—both ‘over’ and ‘under’ reality. The student might recognise that this tendency may not only apply to schoolwork, and make links to other areas of their life. If so a possible ‘theme’ may emerge—behaving the same way in different situations.