

Mentoring Skills

Raising awareness

What can help the learner during mentoring is raising their awareness:

- their awareness of what they feel and think
- their awareness of how they behave
- their awareness of what is going on in their body and the information they are receiving through their senses
- their awareness of how they make contact with other people
- their awareness of their impact on their environment and the environment's impact on them

You raise awareness by listening to the learner's story with your full **attention**. Try and stay in the here and now; meet with them without any agenda; resist the urge to take control by planning and predicting; risk staying with the uncertainty; trust that the learner can grow and change. You can challenge the learner but it is an invitation – do not set out to remove or overcome their resistance.

Zones of awareness

The **inner zone** includes visceral sensations, muscular tension or relaxation, heartbeat, breathing, bodily sensation and feeling

[Imagine your awareness like a torch, which can sweep slowly throughout your body, at your command. Pay attention slowly, taking some time, to your feet, one after the other ... and legs ... your back ... and shoulders ... your genitals ... your belly ... your chest ... your arms ... wrists ... and hands ... your neck ... head ... eyes ... face ... mouth ... Notice areas of tension and relaxation. Notice what other sensations you experience in your body. What emotional tone or feeling do you notice? Where is it located? If you feel nothing or very little, stay with that awareness, let it deepen and then repeat the exploration.]

Awareness of the inner zone, for example through mindfulness, relaxation or other forms of body work, can help greatly with the development of a sense of calm and with mastery over anxiety.

The **outer zone** includes our behaviour, our speech and action and our contact functions, which are all the ways we make contact with the world (seeing, hearing, speaking, tasting, touching, smelling and moving). If we pay attention to our contact functions, we can become skilled in present-moment awareness, in noticing colours, shapes, sounds, textures, etc.

[Move the torch of your awareness outside your body. Take it slowly. What can you see, hear, smell? What can you feel in terms of contact with the world around you? The chair you are sitting on, the feel of your clothes against your body. Look around and see how many colours and shapes you can identify. What sounds can you hear?]

Focusing on the outer zone allows us to become more aware of what we are doing and its effects on others and on ourselves and to notice what is going on around us. Absorption in what is going on around us is a great way of releasing tension and of getting a break from what is bothering us. That is why it is so beneficial for learners to have interests. Most beneficial of all are activities in an area of interest (the area itself does not matter) where there is sufficient challenge that the young person has to concentrate. These activities create the experience of 'flow'.



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The **middle zone** consists of our thinking, memories, fantasies and anticipations. This zone mediates between our inner and outer zones. It organises our experiences so that we come to some kind of cognitive and emotional understanding of them. It also allows us to predict, plan, imagine, create and make choices. It includes beliefs and memories. This is where we label our experiences, which determines how we feel about them.

[In relation to an experience or event, ask *'What are you saying to yourself?'*, *'What sense did you make of that?'*, *'What do you think, or imagine, or fantasise, or hope for?'*, *'What are your reactions?'*, *'Notice what is going on in your body – what do you make of that?'*, *'How do you feel?'*, *'What do you think that might mean?'*]

In mentoring a lot of the work that is done takes place in this middle zone. There is a relationship between feelings and thoughts, and between thoughts and actions. Mentoring allows attention to be focused on the feelings, beliefs and thoughts that lie behind the young person's actions. Once these are recognised they can be addressed. Feelings are affected by how a person perceives and explains them to themselves. The beliefs and thoughts that accompany feelings can be based on inaccurate information (she doesn't like me), illogical reasoning (he didn't ring me because he doesn't care about me) or unhelpful thinking (I need to get drunk before I can enjoy myself here). When the relationship between learner and mentor has been established, it is possible to use the mentoring session to challenge beliefs and thoughts which are getting in the way of the young person's sense of agency and of their happiness.

(Adapted from Joyce and Sills (2001) Skills in Gestalt counselling and psychotherapy. London: Sage and Margaret Curran's Rationale Emotive Behaviour Therapy workshop, organised by NYCI in the Clarion Hotel, Dublin, 16 June 2011)

