

Showing understanding

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Active listening entails showing understanding by tuning into and reflecting with your verbal, voice and body messages the crux of the meaning contained in the verbal, voice and body messages of learners. Mentors provide the gift of their listening so that learners genuinely feel understood.

Sometimes responding as if within learners' internal viewpoint is called empathy. Rogers described empathy as: *"To sense the client's inner world of private personal meanings as if it were your own, but without ever losing the "as if" quality, this is empathy.* Rogers preferred not to think of empathy as a skill, but as an attitude or way of being. In Rogers person-centred counselling, empathic reflections are the counsellor's major tool. In lifeskills mentoring, the proportion of reflections changes according to the stage of the model and to the agendas within specific sessions.

Paraphrasing

Along with reflecting feelings, paraphrasing is one of the component skills of how you show understanding in active listening. It is important that you paraphrase because you will drive people crazy if you parrot them.

A good paraphrase can provide mirror reflections that are clearer and more succinct than original statements. If so, learners may show appreciation with comments such as *'That's right'* or *'Yes, you've got me'*. A simple tip for paraphrasing is to start your responses with the personal pronoun 'you' to indicate that you reflect learner's internal viewpoints, for example *'you feel terrible'*. Another tip is to allow your speech rate down to give you more time to think. You need a good memory and a good command of vocabulary to paraphrase well. Confidence and fluency in the skill require much practice.

Reflecting feelings

Skilled helpers are very sharp at picking up learners feelings. It is important to reflect learners' feelings at the start of the initial sessions to show that you are tuned into them. Reflecting feelings from the beginning, rather than reflecting thoughts alone, can establish a climate for initial and subsequent sessions where learners share rather than bury feelings. Reflecting feelings involves both receiver and sender skills.

Receiver skills

- Understanding learners face and body messages
- Understanding learners voice messages
- Understanding learners verbal messages
- Tuning into the flow of your own emotional reactions
- Taking into account the context of learners messages and sensing the surface and underlying meanings of what they are saying



Mentoring Skills

Sender skills

- Using learners feelings, words and phrases
- Rewording feelings appropriately
- Using voice and body messages that significantly neither add to nor subtract from the emotions conveyed
- Checking the accuracy of your understanding

Picking up voice and body messages

Much information about learners feelings does not come from what they say, but from how they say it. Sometimes learners' verbal, voice and body messages are consistent. In such instances, it is relatively easy to label feelings and their intensity accurately. However, frequently learners messages are heavily encoded. Learners may struggle to express what they *truly* feel in the face of their conditioning about what they *should* feel. It also takes time for learners to trust mentors.

(Adapted from Richard Nelson-Jones (2005) Practical counselling and helping skills. 5th Edition. London: Sage)

