

The Helping Interview:

Advice for Community Action Case Managers

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Probably the single most frequent activity that Community Action Agencies do in the course of rendering help to their clients is conduct interviews – helping interviews, hopefully. Helping interviews are different from general interviews or other forms of communication in that they seek to do far more than merely impart information from one to another. There are inherent qualities about the helping interview that can either enhance or hinder the helping process. This paper examines those qualities with a view toward what promotes helping and what hinders helping.

The First Quality: Role Expectations

The most obvious trait of a helping interview is that it is “asymmetric.” That is, the parties are not doing the same thing and are not standing on equal footing. One is the helper (interviewer) and the other (interviewee) is getting helped. This role separation is loaded with expectations, which might be useful, but often creates barriers to the helping process.

Among the likely expectations are: (1) the interviewer is the authority figure, (2) the interviewer directs the interview process, (3) the interviewer has the solution for the interviewee, (4) the interviewer knows all about the problem, (5) the interviewee needs the interviewer to solve the problem, (6) the interviewer knows more than the interviewee, etc. These expectations, and others like them, may be held by either party, or both parties. The only good thing that emerges from these expectations is that the interviewee has a strong incentive to pay attention to the interviewer. Beyond that, a lot of bad things can come of these role expectations.

Notice that the list of expectations puts a lot of pressure on the interviewer? If we are the interviewer, especially a new one, and we focus on living up to these expectations, we do so at the expense of finding out what is going on with our client. We may talk more than necessary to demonstrate that we are an “authority.” We may control the agenda too much in order to demonstrate that we know all about the problem, and consequently we may inhibit the client from disclosing important aspects about their problem, or the resources for solving it. We may ask too many questions rather than allow our client to disclose and reveal insight about the problem, or resources for solving it. If we are concerned about ourself in order to live up to role expectations, we are neglecting just that much attention for the client.

The most important thing we bring to the process is ourself. If our “self” is tied up fulfilling role expectations, then a major ingredient to the helping interview is missing.

By and large, the client will not care how much we know, until they know how much we care. Regardless of any expectations, the single most important impression to convey as interviewer is the desire to help. And this should also be the guiding impetus behind any actions taken during the interview.

The Second Quality: Helping is Not an Active Behavior

In an interview, helping is not accomplished by something we do, but by something that the client does. Our part of the helping is to create the circumstances that lead, or enable, the client to do what must be done. This is contrary to how we usually think of helping. Usually, we think of helping as something that we do for another, like carry their luggage, take out the garbage, or answer a question. The helping interview is different.

Why is that? Someone who needs help can act in either of two ways: they can use defensive routines or they can use coping routines. Defensive routines are aimed at minimizing the emotional discomfort of a problem. They do not solve or improve problems, they usually distract from doing something constructive about problems. In some areas, like addiction therapy, defensive routines are called “denial.” If the client has a problem that has persisted for awhile, the chances are high that defensive routines are in play. And, these defensive routines present an obstacle for rendering help.

Coping routines, on the other hand, are aimed at dealing constructively with the problem. It is important to learn what coping routines the client has and to what extent these can be augmented with training, resources, or other support that our agency can offer. If we draw out the client’s coping routines, and maybe augment them with some well placed additional resources, the chances that our client can overcome the problem is improved. If our client continues to use defensive routines, coping does not occur, resources given are wasted, and the problem persists. Helping is best accomplished by leading our client into discovery of their coping potential.

If we revisit the lessons of the “First Quality,” we can see all the more why a focus on role expectations can be a hindrance to helping. Role expectations provide a natural cover for using defensive routines. To the extent that some role expectations create anxiety (for either party) they may actually induce or encourage defensive routines. So, in addition to conveying that we desire to help, our actions should aim at eliminating the need for, or the use of, defensive routines in the interview. To the extent that our client enlarges their coping routines, the helping process is underway.

The Third Quality: Blind Spots Prevent Collaboration

The helping interview is a transaction with multiple “blind” spots. These blind spots prevent the interviewer and interviewee from becoming collaborators. Collaboration is the most effective relationship we can achieve in providing help. In

collaboration, giving and getting advice, sharing insights, planning actions, building endurance, and enjoying growth, flow freely and far more effectively than any other type of relationship.

So, what are these blind spots? And, why do they prevent collaboration? Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham developed a model of personal transaction called the “Johari Window.” (named after the authors’ first names, Joe and Harry). A modified version of the Johari Window is presented below to depict the Helping Interview.

Johari Window for Helping Interviews

	Known to Interviewer	Not Known to Interviewer
Known to Client	Open	Hidden
Not Known to Client	Blind	Unknown

Notice that there are four quadrants to the window. The one labeled “Open” represents those areas of awareness where things are known by us and by the client. We can work together on these things clearly and effectively. But, those things in the area labeled “Hidden” represent things the client knows, but we do not. They are “hidden” from us either because the client is using defensive routines, or because we are not paying proper attention to the client. Things in this quadrant are not available to us in rendering help, at least temporarily.

The quadrant labeled “Blind” represents an area of awareness where we are “in the know” but the client is not. This area is a blind spot for the client. We can see things about the client that the client does not see about himself. A large part of the helping process is to reduce the “Blind” quadrant. This is often not an easy task. A common everyday example may illustrate: Suppose a co-worker has bad breath and is unaware of this (as is usually the case). Do you eliminate this blind spot? What is the risk of hurting their feelings? We need a special kind of relationship to effectively eliminate blind spots.

Finally, there is an area labeled “Unknown” where neither we nor the client has any awareness or knowledge. Since the universe is large (if not infinite) this quadrant is certain to exist in any relationship. Aside from the general hazards of ignorance, this

quadrant presents another challenge for helping transactions in that we cannot distinguish this area from “Blind” spots and “Hidden” spots, without a considerable level of trust.

Part of our objective in the interview process is to increase the “Open” quadrant to the degree necessary to render help. We do this by reducing the “Blind” spots and the “Hidden” spots. Although it is necessary and helpful to increase the “Open” area, having “openness” is not the end in itself. It is a means (essential and important) to the larger objective of helping our clients strengthen their coping routines.

When two people set out to increase their “Open” quadrant, they inevitably also increase their vulnerability. It should not be surprising, then, that the process takes time and aggressive attempts to hasten this process usually do not work. We must keep in mind that when our client discards defensive routines they are deliberately making themselves vulnerable (from their perspective, at least) and so it is important that we respond with some reassurance and with some direction toward the coping routines that can replace the defensive routines, and for the better.

The Fourth Quality: An Element of Crisis

There is usually an element of “crisis” with the first session of a helping interview process. Even if it doesn’t seem like a crisis to us, something is amiss to the extent that our client was motivated to seek out help from a complete stranger, and in a strange place, which is usually not a comfortable situation. The condition of crisis brings with it a load of emotions that can be bothersome, sometimes dangerous, upsetting, and usually resistant to rational overtures.

These emotions are both a troublesome thing and useful thing, if we act wisely. So long as the emotions are high, not much constructive action is going to occur. It is, however, a time when “emotional bank accounts” can be developed (see the next section). It is important to allow lots of ventilation before trying to do any rational work with our client. It is important to mostly listen, actively and empathically. A lot of useful information will come out. Not all of it will be true about the facts, but most of it will be true about what motivates our client.

The good part about the emotions of a crisis is that after a certain level of calming two things happen: (1) some degree of trust and appreciation develops because we allowed the ventilation, and (2) there is a great desire to have structure about the problem. If we assist the client with creating a structure about the problem situation, we’ve made a great start. This structure should include some “plain” statements to restate the previous rants, some specific actions to take in the short term, and a follow up appointment time for talking about the next steps to take. What is powerful about this structure is that (1) it suppresses further anxiety outbreaks, and (2) if the client departs from the structure those crisis anxieties will return prompting our client to get back on track in order to feel better. The structure we created is a self reinforcing device. The crisis nature of the first visit is a special one-time opportunity to exert a powerful influence on the behavior of our client.

It is unlikely that the problem will be fully solved with a single visit, but, if prepared, we can initiate a lasting influence on the subsequent outcomes. If we fail to address the crisis aspect of the first visit, we not only miss a great opportunity, we may lose the client altogether or we may languish in shallow effectiveness from this point on.

The Fifth Quality: Listening is Everything!

The way to accomplish most of the challenges outlined above is through “empathic” listening. This is a special kind of listening which encourages the other to talk. It is an acquired skill, and it is often a difficult skill. It is a kind of listening which accompanies the other through their emotions, beliefs, and thought processes so they may face or discover parts of themselves that they could not otherwise. It is a kind of listening where our client feels “heard” in a nonjudgmental way.

It is important to be nonjudgmental so that our client feels free to speak openly and explore those areas that may be locked up by fear, guilt, shame, or any number of misgivings. Being nonjudgmental, however, is not the same thing as sharing agreement about things said. Being empathetic is not the same thing as being sympathetic. Sympathy involves a “normalizing” or “agreeing” between parties. Empathic listening makes clear that we heard what our client is saying and extends encouragement to continue exploring what is “on the table.” Despite the temptation to “moralize” when our client seems way off base, it is better to not interrupt the flow of thoughts and feelings and maintain confidence that our client will work past these points if given the chance.

Empathic listening is a lot of work and feels unnatural. As our client speaks, we get insights that we would like to share. After all, we have seen situations like this before. Unfortunately, if we jump in with our own stuff, our client will shut down, or perhaps resent us for not letting them find the insight themselves, or they may simply reject our advice and set things back considerably. In the previous section an expression was introduced, “emotional bank account.” It seems that we must build up an “emotional bank account” or earn the right to give advice or insights. We earn this right by listening. That is, we accompany our client along their journey for awhile. At some point, when they feel that we truly understand them, they will become open to advice or insights from us – but not before. With patience, they will accept challenges to their blind spots.

How do we engage in empathic listening? We do it with our ears, our eyes, our comments, and all of our body language. It is not just being silent. It is being there with an active spirit of curiosity. We have to show that we are interested. Sometimes this means adding something to the conversation, but then giving the direction back to the client. Sometimes this means allowing silent, dead, space. This is time when the client may be probing more deeply for where to go next. If we interrupt this silent period, it may signal that we’re through listening. Sometimes this means giving encouraging signals like: nodding, change of posture, short comments or questions (hmm, what happens then? Etc.) or simply restating what the client says to ensure that we understand. Whatever we do, it should not become mechanical or insincere.

The Sixth Quality: The Helping Interview Has Phases

There are probably many different models of helping, counseling, or interviewing and this paper will not settle which is best or correct. One simple model is offered, however, that can be useful to gauge progress and determine which mode of engagement is likely to be most effective. This model outlines three phases:

Attentive Listening. This phase was described above as empathic listening. The client is allowed to direct the conversation. The primary objective is for the client to disclose as much as possible and develop trust in the interviewer. This phase cannot be hurried. Diagnostic attempts at this time will likely meet resistance. Prescriptions offered at this time will likely be rejected. If this phase is conducted well, it may preclude much or all of the remaining phases. That is, the client may solve their own problem. This phase addresses the “Hidden” quadrant of the Johari Window. (known to the client, unknown to the interviewer)

Diagnostic Questioning. This phase marks a slight transition in the conversation where the interviewer is more directive with questioning. At this point, the interviewer has a set of hypotheses to explore or affirm, and the client has gained trust in the interviewer and the interviewer’s ability and intention to help the client. If the first phase was conducted effectively, this phase should be more of a collaboration in exploring the causes of problems rather than an interrogation by the interviewer. With good empathic listening, often the client will move into this phase on his own and even discover the appropriate diagnosis. This phase addresses the “Blind” quadrant of the Johari Window. (known to the interviewer, unknown to the client)

Prescription Rendering. This phase marks a move to prescriptive active. In the best circumstances this is also a collaborative activity, though usually the interviewer has something to offer that was not available to the client on their own. For Community Action Agencies these prescriptions include the services and resources that they make available. Oftentimes, however, the required prescription goes beyond this to include unique ways that clients can make the most of these opportunities. This phase addresses the “Open” quadrant of the Johari Window. (known to both interviewer and client) It is only as effective as the Open Window has become during the preceding phases.

The most common mistake of interviewers is to move from the first phase to the second and third too quickly. The second most common mistake is to fail to return to the first phase when needed. Let’s explore this briefly.

If our client has only one straight forward problem, we may proceed through the three phases in a simple linear sequence. But, most people and circumstances are a lot more complicated than this. And so, in some areas we could be in the first phase, and in another area, we could be in a diagnostic mode, and so on. In some areas, the client has trust in us and insight into themselves, but perhaps others areas are still hidden from us or

blind to the client. We cannot assume that everything is progressing lock step together. As new issues emerge, we must return to the first phase again. Indeed, to determine if there are additional issues, we should return to the first phase just for good measure. The first phase is about letting our client know that we “hear” them. Returning to the first phase is about ensuring that our client “heard” us. In either case, we must be the listener.

It is important to be aware that there are three different modes of engagement and recognize which mode is operative at any given time. It is important to not rush too quickly from one phase to another, especially from the first phase to the second. It is useful to be flexible about retracing to an earlier phase, especially the first phase. Look for hints from the client for readiness to move to the next phase. Often they will signal in obvious ways. As rapport builds, it is possible to simply ask the client if they are ready for diagnostic feedback, or do they have more to tell us?

The Seventh Quality: Helping Has a Spiritual Foundation

There might be a little bit of Science to helping, there is certainly a lot of Art to helping, but more than these a Passionate Desire is essential to helping. And, there is another element that is rarely discussed, but may be the most important of all. The Helper must believe that the person seeking help deserves help, wants to overcome problems, and is capable of overcoming problems. At its core, we must believe in a basic “goodness” of people. That is, if given a chance, people seeking help will find and adopt the needed insights and coping skills.

Earlier, this paper stated that the “helping” occurs by what the client is doing, rather than what we are doing. If we do not believe the client can do what is necessary, we are not likely to let him. We might interrupt before the client discovers his own coping potential. Or, the client may interpret our intrusions as a lack of confidence in him or indifference about his worthiness to grow.

To be sure, some clients will test our sincerity. Most likely, they have been abused by others and some of those others have probably feigned sincerity in the process. It is only natural that cynicism is part of the package clients bring to us. The best preparation for dealing with this is to get clear about our own “self.” What is our personal philosophy about life? Why do we want to help others? Who do we think we are? (we might actually get asked this question). What are we afraid of? What do we worry about? What makes us feel good -- both hedonistically and morally. At most therapeutic clinics, the therapists get therapy for just this purpose.

In pursuing the “know thyself” discipline, there are two levels of mastery. The first is to develop competency with the basic material, that is, we become familiar and comfortable with ourself. The second level of mastery, however, is to become familiar and comfortable with others who are not masters. It is this second level of mastery that the helping professional must attain. The first level is inadequate because it leaves us with a tendency to try to help others by making them become like us. This is far too

narrow a repertoire to be an effective helping professional. In the second level of mastery, we become so familiar and comfortable with ourselves that we can “leave ourselves behind awhile” to accompany another on their journey without worrying that we will lose ourselves.

A less ethereal explanation may help here. If we listen to another’s ideas, there is a chance that, that experience will influence us, will change us. If we are comfortable with a certain way of understanding things, and someone pushes a completely opposite view at us, we often shut down, block out, or resist those thoughts, ideas, and views. We do it to protect ourselves from the discomfort or dissonance that arises from incompatible viewpoints, especially viewpoints incompatible with our own personal foundation. If we feel we must protect ourselves from our clients, well it is obvious that we are abandoning them to some extent.

The difference between the first level and the second level of mastery is a matter of perspective. If we know ourselves in the broader context of the entire community, or all of humanity, or the whole universe, we are less fearful of “getting lost.” We are ready to board the *Starship Enterprise* and “go where no man has gone before,” metaphorically. We are able to accompany someone on their way to mastery even though it is different from our own version of mastery – “I’m Okay, You’re Okay.” Generally speaking, this level of perspective and the requisite beliefs about people involve spirituality.

RENABBS ECLEPS (ree NABS’ ee kleps’)

A lot was covered in this paper. How can we organize it succinctly? Repeat to yourself “Renabbs Ecleps.” It’s a nonsense mnemonic word with lots of meaning.

beware of Role Expectations as they may get between you and your client

helping is Not an Active Behavior it is accomplished by what the client does

work to eliminate Blind Spots so you can collaborate with your client

anticipate an Element of Crisis by allowing ventilation and creating structure

accomplish by Listening Empathically as this is the key to everything for the client

pace yourself through the Phases that a helping process involves

prepare yourself Spiritually for the challenges that come with helping

Role Expectations – Not an Active Behavior – Blind Spots
Element of Crisis – Listen Empathically – Phases – Spirituality.