2. Some First Principles – Page Version

Introduction

In the next few sections, we will give a number of “golden rules” for working with clients. Most of these are things that we know somewhere deep down but have forgotten. We start with what we think are the most basic.

*Please note: in all of the activities that we ask you to carry out that ask for client situations,* do not *give situations in which clients or other people can be identified directly.*

Taking an Interest in and Concentrating on the Client

The first point is that, when we are with a client, we must devote our entire attention to that person and not to other things. This is easy to say and difficult to do for most of us. In general, we have difficult and complicated lives. Thus, we may be thinking about something in our personal life or something that we will have to do later or even about what we are going to have for dinner. We may be interrupted by the telephone or by someone coming in and asking about something or by something else.

It is simple, in one sense. Unless we give our complete concentration to client, the relationship won’t work.

Another point is whether or not we like or can empathize with the client. In most cases, we do. However, there are a number of situations in which we have our opinions about the client and don’t like him or her or the kind of life she or he is leading or the actions that he or she has taken. There may be a clash of personalities. This can create very substantial problems within the relationship. In the most extreme instances, we find that the sessions with the client are a burden to us. Our advice under such circumstances is, first, to get supervision about the client. If the relationship really isn’t working, our advice is to end the relationship and send the client to another caregiver. We will discuss identification and empathy with the client in a further section of this course.

Activities

Give an example of a situation in which you concentrated on a client and it worked.

Give another example of a situation in which you didn’t give your full attention to the client. What happened?

Are there situations when this doesn’t apply? Describe your experience.

Taking an Attitude of Humanity and Compassion

Another fundamental principle of working with clients is to have humanity and compassion. We all are human beings. We all have our strengths and our faults. The point here is to attempt to feel what the person is feeling and to see the person’s actions from a human point of view. Frequently, we are occupied, and preoccupied, by the formalities that we need to carry out with the client and the information that we want to get to assist the person. We forget that the person has feelings and emotions and is in a situation that may not be his or her usual one and thus that the person may be under a great deal of stress. Such humanity and compassion should not blind your objectivity, however. Objectivity on the one hand and humanity and compassion on the other are two very different things and are very much compatible with one another in our experience. It takes experience to separate them. We will get into identification with the client and remaining objective in another section in more detail.

Activities

Give a situation in which a client was treated with humanity and compassion. How did the client feel? How did you feel?

Give a situation in which a client was not treated with humanity and compassion. How did the client feel? How did you feel?

Give situations in which having humanity and compassion doesn’t apply.

Listening and Responding to the Total Person

It is crucial to look at the entire person and not only her or his words. In fact, we know that about 70% of communication is non-verbal. Thus, we want to look at the total person. How is the person dressed? Does the person have a distinct odor? What is the person’s posture? What are the person’s muscles and body doing? How does the person walk and move? What are the person’s facial expressions? Also, are the person’s words saying what other aspects of his or her speech saying? One example might be the person saying, “I’m very calm” in a very excited or angry tone of voice. Another typical example might be the person saying, “I’m all right” when it’s obvious from the low volume and the tone of voice that the person is depressed or angry.

Our point here is that the caregiver needs to be looking at the client continuously and critically to get as much information as possible about the client and not take account only of what his or her words are saying.

We’ll get into this in much more detail in the courses on communication and psychology.

Activities

Give a few examples of situations in which a person’s words did not match his or her behavior and other characteristics.

Give an example of a situation in which the client’s words did, in fact, match her or his behavior and other characteristics.

Are there situations in which it is not important to look at the total person?

In the next section, we’ll get into a few points about language and getting to know the client better.