

CHAPTER SIX

ROLE OF THE FRONT-LINE WORKER

Role of the Front Line Worker

The role of a front-line worker with regard to their clients' mental health is not to be underestimated in its value. Front line workers are a central component in the continuum of mental health care delivery. Front line workers often have close and trusting relationships with their clients and they are very often the first point of contact.

Many people distrust mental health services, including detox and recovery programs and so front-line workers can play an important supportive role in offering and discussing therapeutic interventions. Mental health concerns can be deeply concerning and debilitating so increased mental health literacy and skill is beneficial to front line workers.

It is important for frontline workers to be mindful of their range of skills and appropriate scope of practice. Finding clinical supervision will help ensure continued skill development in a climate of increased safety for clients.

Many therapeutic interventions are based on simple communication and supportive skills. Bill Coleman, Psychologist at BCCDC and Forensic Services for over 20 years has been working in Canada and other countries as a counsellor for people living with HIV/HCV. He is in the process of developing a Peer Counselling manual and training program for PHA Peer Counsellors. He has developed a model called NANNIE and the theory and skill application is also suitable for front-line workers. The Peer Training Manual follows.

Peer Training Manual: The NANNIE Approach

(a draft, currently under construction)

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Introduction

A brief introduction to the NANNIE Method will be outlined here. Each of the six core characteristics in the NANNIE Method will be described later in the manual with the rationale and purpose of each of these basic principles.

The NANNIE approach incorporates basic counselling skills generally taken from the non directive approach of counselling. Below are the basic tenants of the Model.

The NANNIE approach

No Judgment

Acceptance

No Fixing/No advice

No Questions

It is not about you

Empathy

Who is a peer?

A peer is someone who is similar to the person they are working with in some significant ways. The peer counsellor and the person being helped may have important characteristics in common. These may be such things as women working together, unemployed, gay people, or HIV+ persons. What makes the peer important to the process is that the peer will have experiences similar to the people they are talking with. These shared experiences will allow greater understanding of the problems faced by the client. These shared experiences can allow better empathy and enhance trust between the counsellor and client.

History of peer counselling

Peer support and peer counselling has a long history. Though formal counselling was not a concept in medieval times, some would argue that the Knights of the Round Table and the Three Musketeers were peer support groups. The most well known modern peer-based program in North America is the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) model, which dates back to the 1930s. In the AA model, people share the problem of alcohol negatively affecting their lives. Many schools and universities also have active peer programs for students helping other students.

Why peer counselling

Peers offer unique perspectives to counselling and support that professionals do not have. Very few professional therapists can truly understand the life of living on the street the way a peer is able to understand. Only a peer who is living on the street can truly understand the problems and feelings experiences while living on the street. Similarly, peers in many situations may have greater understandings of the particular circumstances that a professional may lack. Not only can the peer perhaps empathise more with the client, they may be less judgemental about the circumstance. Understanding and acceptance without judgment are some of the basic tenets in counselling. This enables the peer to begin their work with enhanced basic counselling qualities.

The nature of being a peer counsellor is that payment for service is not part of the context. This makes for cost effective programming. Because the peer is not paid, they begin on a more equal footing to explore the issues at hand. When a therapist is paid, there may be much inequality in the relationship.

What do peers bring?

Peers bring an understanding of some basic experiences. These experiences are what make them a peer. The peer has unique experiences shared by the client. The peers share experiences that are unique to the group of people being identified for counselling. It might be cancer survivor, rape victim, or gay teen; these experiences are very different from the average person. The peer can more easily empathize and understand some of the problems faced by the shared experiences.

The peers also bring a human experience, rather than a professional role. The peer is there to help out of caring for others; they are not being paid to listen to others. The peer has an understanding of what it is like to ... for example live with a cancer diagnosis, or the emotional impact of being raped, or living as a gay teen. These shared experiences are an important aspect of being a peer counsellor. Trust and understanding are more readily built between the peer and the client because of shared experiences.

What can peers do?

Peers generally offer support and understanding to persons with problems of living. However, there can even be a place for peers to work with mentally ill persons in supporting them in problems of living with mental illness.

Peers help others to explore their problems and concerns and allow the client to find their own solutions. By allowing the client to find his or her own solution, the peer does not get involved in "fixing" or advice giving.

The peer takes the position that if the individual explores and understands their problem or situation then they can find workable solutions for themselves.

When “helpers” take the approach of giving advice, the subtle message is that the client is not able to solve their own problems. When a peer listens, supports, and assists the client to fully explore their issues, and find their own solution, then the client learns that they can solve their own problems with support.

Limitations of peers

Peers may not be the best at addressing severe mental illness, or very complex issues like sexual abuse, suicide (unless it is peer support for this purpose). Peers also should not be put in position where they have to address violent and dangerous situations.

It is also important that peers always have supervision to go to for help and assistance in dealing with any situation that they may not feel comfortable or equipped to handle. By providing supervision for peers, any difficulties that arise are addressed. It is important for the client and the peer counsellor to meet soon after each peer counselling session, this allows for prompt response and support to important issues that arise.

Strengths of a peer model

The use of peers to provide services expands the service of any non-profit organization. Peers also gain tremendous satisfaction out of offering their skills to others.

The model of peer counselling in this manual does not involve the peers in giving advice or telling the client what to do. By not giving advice, peers avoid situations where there may be problematic results. Peers provide a sounding board and make space for the client to find their own solutions. This model supports the client in understand their own resourcefulness, and abilities to resolve problems of living. This can also have long-term consequences for the client to become more confident and independent.

An additional strength for this model is that it is very inexpensive to implement. Offering peer counselling services to an organization’s members both assists the membership and enhances the organization’s reputation.

The non directive approach to counselling

It is important to explore the underpinnings of the peer training model described in this manual. These principles primarily come from the non-directive approach to counselling that Carl Rogers is generally credited with founding.

This approach is based on focusing on the human being as a person and putting the person in the centre of psychotherapy, it is seen as an art of personal encounter. (Schmid, 2002)

The training helps the peers to learn a few basic aspects of non-directive counselling.

These include:

- Focus on the experiencing of self
- Moment by moment empathy
- High level of personal presence
- Egalitarian stance
- Self determination and free choice as human possibilities
- Pro-social nature of human beings
- The client is the expert
- The peer accepts the clients knowledge
- The client is the expert for both the content and process of discussion
- The peer is a facilitator for the client
- The peer is wholly present
- The client comes first (client centred)
- Counselling is the art of “not knowing” not fixing not having answers....
- The non directive approach sees resources instead of problems
- Non directive approach sees the ability to grow instead of disorder
- The peer listens and facilitative instead of guiding/steering or giving advice
- The peer may provide education but not teach

The non-directive approach the peers will strive for the concepts of “What does the client show, or reveal? What are the aspects that the client wants to be understood?”

The client is the expert in that he is the one who has knowledge of his life and circumstances, and the capability to solve the problems facing him, even though he may not have as yet come to believe that.

Non-directive approach to counselling is not truly nondirective, but it is less directive than some other approaches. Any response to a client is directive in some way.

The non directive approach is a type of psychotherapy in which the patient is in the dominant position and is given complete freedom to express himself.

Making counselling affordable and accessible to everyone

Peers need to be recruited from the population being served. It is important that the peers are part of the population that is being served. Peer counselling should be done in a relaxed non-clinical atmosphere. The peer also needs to look like his peers he is working with. He should dress like them and sound like them as much as possible

The peer counsellors must be supported with supervision, and whatever institutional supports that are available to make the volunteer experience stress free and enjoyable. An agency may pay for transportation to the office for volunteering; they may give the occasional gift cards, or gifts of appreciation. It is important that peers not be seen as employees but are recognized for the great service that they are volunteering to the agency.

Generally, peers should not volunteer more than four hours at one time. Shorter volunteering experiences are likely to cause less stress. It is important to provide supervision as soon as possible after the volunteer practice.

Peer counselling practice – how do peers provide counselling

The role of the peer is to provide support. They have learned to listen without judgment and assist the client to explore their concerns and find their own solutions. The peer is non-judgmental, and carefully listening to the client. With the peer's empathic understanding the client is able to explore fully their concerns and arrive at their own solutions. The peers initially may wish to "help" and often find it difficult not to offer advice, but they also have learned that by "fixing", they limit exploration of the problem and the client is less likely to act on the offered solution. The by not "fixing" and offering advice the peers are free to focus on the client's feelings, emotions and concerns. Through this process, the client feels heard, accepted, and safe to explore fully the issue at hand.

It is important for agencies that provide services to a community ensure that there will not be harm done by the peers providing counselling. The NANNIE process as outlined in this manual strives to reduce harm by not offering advice or "fixes" for problems.

Peers are not to be "professionalized". Peers are to remain peers.

The important role that the peer plays is that they share some important similar characteristics. The value of the peer is that they can empathize in a way a professional may not. The peer must remain a peer and not be encumbered with extensive theory. The peer needs to be free to attend fully to the client and bring only his human understanding and acceptance to provide the comfort and safety to explore fully their issues.

Do peers make better counsellors than professionals? Some studies have shown that peers can do as well or even better than professionals. Peers are a valuable resource! Berman and Norton found that paraprofessionals and professionals were equal in effectiveness. (1985) Hattie Sharpley and Rogers found that paraprofessionals were more effective than professionals (1984) There are many other studies showing the effectiveness of peers and paraprofessionals are equal or better than professionals.(Christensen and Jacobson 1994, Durlak 1979,Harris, Larsen 2007, Dennis 2003) In fact most of these studies indicate that peer or paraprofessionals are more effective than professional therapists.

What peers have to offer clients.

Many people feel more comfortable discussing their situation with someone who has experience in confronting a similar problem that the client is having. The peer also may be able to empathise better with someone if they have shared some of the same problems.

A peer is also not likely to be as threatening to talk with; as a professional might be just by the nature of the professional, being a therapist can make him threatening. Also the professional therapist may not have had some of the same experiences so may be only intellectually relate to the problems being brought forward.

Selecting peers for training

In selecting people for the training to be a peer counsellor, there are a few important characteristics. You will want someone who is **flexible** and **adapt** to a "new approach" to listening to and helping others. They must also be **interested in people** and able to **empathise** with them. What we want is people who **can truly listen**, **respect** others and their differences, and be able to **keep a confidence**.

The training itself will also act as a screening method in selecting peers for training. The use of criteria in evaluating when a peer is ready to begin counselling for an agency is an excellent approach. Once a person has shown they can integrate the training into something workable with others they are ready to work as a peer under supervision.

People person

The peer must be the type of person who **genuinely enjoys people**. Someone who is **curious about people**, someone who **tries to understand** what a person is going through. It is important to recruit people who naturally **like people**.

Strong sense of self

A **strong sense of self** is important because the peer must be able to set aside who he is and his needs, and be there for the client. When a person has a strong sense of who they are and are more or less comfortable within themselves, they are then more able to focus on others much more easily.

Believe in respect, non-judgment, accepting of differing views

This may sound simple but we find that **respect and acceptance** is very difficult for people. As long as people have similar views they are easy to accept and respect them but when people have differing views it can become more difficult for the peer to respect and accept. The peer must be able to accept others who are different have different values and work with them in a positive way.

An example of this might be an intelligent successful individual may decide to leave his wife and kids and just tour the world on his own, or decide to begin experimenting with heroin, or expand their use of pornography and prostitutes. The peer must be able to accept the person in front of them without judgment, with acceptance, and respect. Through training, many people can learn to become less judgmental, and more accepting. Therefore, this is a place where flexibility is also important for the peer. In selecting peers, they need not be without judgment but open to letting go of their judgment of others.

Honest – having integrity

It is important that the peer is **honest** with others. He then has **credibility**. If the peer is honest with others, they will have credibility. If the peer is not able to be **genuine** with the client then it undermines trust and the process of support.

The ideal peer would find it difficult to “protect” a client from hurtful or difficult responses. He would value the honest relationship he has developed with the client and respect him by being honest even if the client would be hurt by the information.

Some examples of this might be:

“It sounds like you can be quite vicious at times.”

“It seem as though you really want to hurt him.”

“Hurting him as much as you can seems to be very important to you.”

“You talk about being honest, but it sounds like you will easily lie to get what you want.”

By being honest with the client, they realize that there is not only acceptance but also honesty allows the client to feel safe and open up more about his concerns.

Personally secure – tolerance of ambiguity

When a person is personally secure, they are freer to make mistakes, and take risks. Peer counselling is not an exact science, most of the time it may not be clear of what is the precise response to make, and therefore it requires flexibility as well as risk-taking. Persons who like a predictable safe way of working can find peer counselling difficult, because it is vague, without a rigid set of rules of what to do. Counselling is not an exact science.

They share important qualities of client population

The peer must be part of the group they are working with. Therefore, if the peer target group is for gay youth, then the peers **MUST** be young and gay. Just being young or just being gay is not enough to be a peer in this case; they must be identified as “gay youth”.

It is important that the peer share the same characteristics that are identified for the peer. A bisexual person may not relate as well as a gay person to the issues faced by gay youth. Many organizations “bend” the criteria to recruit peer volunteers. No matter how skilled the “peer” may be it is deceptive for a client to believe they are meeting with a peer only to find out that they are not really peers at all.

An example may be peers working with other mentally ill persons. Someone who once has a short course of antidepressants is not a peer to someone with an entrenched mental illness diagnosis.

Persons who do not try to control or direct others

Some people who are drawn to the profession of counselling like to control and influence others. It is important to make sure that the peers are not looking to increase their own sense of importance by directing or telling others how to live their lives. The person who is interested in controlling others can build dependence and create many problems for the client. It is important that during the training that the trainer be able to identify persons who have such control issues.

Comfortable to be around - likeable

The peer counsellor needs to be someone who is **likeable**, and someone that is **comfortable to be with**. They need to be **non-threatening, easy to talk to**. They need to show a bit of confidence without arrogance.

The Training

The training is mostly a time for the peers to practice and get used to intensely listening to someone. This is the opportunity for them to try to apply the basic principles learned.

Demonstrations of proper use of the NANNIE method is extremely important. The opportunity for a class to see the application of the NANNIE method provides a practical realistic use of the method. The abstraction of a described method can be difficult to understand.

The other important aspect of the training is the practice by the peers. They only learn how to use this method and become comfortable with it after many hours of practice. This involved working together on their own issues to learn how they can use the method.

One additional difference in this training is the role-playing is not done in groups of two. Many persons find the role-playing difficult and very stressful. In this role-playing, the peers break into groups of three. One person plays the “client”, and one is the “peer counsellor” and the third is an assistant to the “counsellor”.

The peer counsellor will discuss what he heard from the client with his assistant (in front of the silent client). (The client listens to the discussion and learns how differently things can be interpreted and perceived) The counsellor and his assistant will also discuss the theme of the response to give the “client”. This enables a complete discussion and greater understanding of what was said to the peer counsellor. They are working together to understand the client so it feels safer and easier. {After the peers gain sufficient skills they do, the role-plays in groups of two.}

This three-some method allows for a safer more comfortable experience. In addition, the exercise is much more than “choosing the right phrase or sentence to respond” to respond to the client. It becomes an exercise in understanding what was important in what was said to the peer.

How much training is needed?

Experience shows that about 30- 40 hours of training are required.

Participating in peer counsellor training can be an exciting process. The concepts are difficult to implement at first for most people. It is generally a struggle for the peers to relearn new ways of being with someone. This relearning process can be a significant challenge. Usually between halfway and 2/3 of the way through the training, the peers gain skills and confidence, and become excited about what they can accomplish through applying the NANNIE model.

The peers often find it difficult to let go of their own ego, their sense of self, and who they are. It is not easy for peers to initially understand that “who they are” is not part of the helping process. Peer counselling involves trusting people to find their own answers to their life problems. The helping peer also understands that the peer provides an environment where the client can explore the dynamics of the problems and talk about them openly and freely until they find something that works for them. The peer’s job is only to create an accepting open space to explore problems. Most peers wish initially to give lots of advice and tell others what to do. When the peer learns that listening and accepting others is how the peer can be the most helpful. It can take awhile for the peers to be able to understand the concept and the value of it. Once the peers see the NANNIE concept at work and understand the value they can more easily integrate it into the counselling.

Learning counselling skills

Individuals will come with differing experiences and skill levels. It can sometimes be more difficult for people who have some counsellor training or experience to relearn a new approach. This is where observation of the NANNIE method can be most effective in helping peers to understand the value of the model.

Introduction of basic counselling principles

The basic peer counselling principles in the NANNIE method embrace the widely accepted basic principles of counselling. These basic principles are empathy, acceptance, and nonjudgmental acceptance of the client. These basic “core conditions” are the basis of many current counselling theories.

Each of the six core characteristics in the NANNIE method will be described below with the rational and purpose of each of these basic principles.

The NANNIE approach

No Judgment

Acceptance

No Fixing/No advice

No Questions

It is not about you

Empathy

NO JUDGMENT

This basic “core condition” that is widely accepted in counselling approaches is important because only when the person feels accepted are they free to explore more risky or treating issues. When a person feels that there will be no judgment of their feelings and beliefs then they can experience the acceptance that is also demonstrated by the peer counsellor.

The lack of judgment is a basic (elemental) part of effective peer counselling because most of the other “core conditions” of the NANNIE method are based on establishing a atmosphere of true acceptance of the other.

An additional aspect of there being no judgment allows the client to be more accepting of the peer without judgment. Peers can feel vulnerable because they lack extensive formal training in counselling theory. If they also feel that there will be no judgment of them by the client they can be more relaxed, natural responsive in the peer counselling/support process.

Suspending judgment is more difficult than many believe. Most people think that they are not judgmental, but we all have our “hot button” issues where we find it hard not to judge. Some typical examples are rape, sexual assault, spousal assault etc. If we rationally think about the effects of our judgment of these issues, we generally will know that our judgement will not be helpful in the process of discussion of these issues, but we often still find it hard to accept without judgment. Part of the training is to help the peers to understand how difficult it is to be free of judgment. Also the training will help the peers to become more sensitive to their “Hot button” issues and work on reducing judgment in the counselling process.

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is when one is able to accept the person or situation without a desire to change or fix the situation. This is very similar to Rogers “unconditional positive regard”. Acceptance goes beyond non-judgmental

approach. Acceptance also includes the concept of having no agenda of change. A peer may be able to be without judgment of a situation that the client brought to them but they must also have no agenda for that person to change in some way the peer believes to be in the client's own best interest.

Thomas Gordon said back in 1970 that "When a person feels that he is truly accepted by another, as he is, then he is freed to move from there to begin to think about how he wants to change, how he wants to grow, how he can become different, how he might become more of what he is capable of being." Gordon 1970, 1975, 2000 page 38)

It is very common for a person to harbour a desire for a person to change or move in some specific direction that the peer may feel is in the best interest of the other. An example of this might be a person who has pre cancerous condition and is told to stop smoking for they will have severe health complications. It is easy for a well-meaning peer to have the agenda for this person to stop smoking. The effective peer counsellor recognizes that it is not his place to try to run someone else's life, and pressure him to change in any particular way. The role of the peer is to support the client in his life's struggles and explore the issues before him. Acceptance of another without trying to change/control/influence his life and decisions frees that other person to fully explore himself and his options.

Acceptance is a difficult concept to get across to perspective peer counsellors. Most people's interaction involves trying to influence and change those around them. This attempt to influence others can be about them changing their opinion, actions or words. The irony in peer counselling is that only by not trying to change/control/influence another person is that person fully free to broadly explore and take action that he feels right for him.

Peer counsellors often need to be reminded that they are not to try to influence change but they are to support the person in exploration of their options and support their choices. It is seductive for peer counsellors to see themselves as directing people into building better lives for themselves. Whereas, the successful peer counsellor will support the client in finding their own direction without pressure or direction from the peers.

NO FIXING/NO ADVICE

This concept of no fixing is a difficult concept to implement for most new peer counsellors. Most persons volunteering to be peer counsellors tend to see themselves as person who are dispensing advice and directing people's lives. Because of this it is often difficult for peers to refraining from fixing and telling others how to live their life. With integration of the concepts of ACCEPTANCE and NO JUDGMENT, the concept of no fixing becomes clearer for the peer.

It is important that the peer understands that their solutions may not be the best for everyone. The peer does not live the others life and cannot really know what is best for them to do. Fixing and advice giving usually ends exploration of the problem and other options to cope with the problem are left unexplored.

A good example of the advice giving and fixing would be a situation where a person is repeatedly very risking sex. One may be tempted to "fix" by telling the other that this is extremely dangerous and they need to use condoms when they are having anal sex. Such advice giving often results in ending discussion. The person never explores why they are putting themselves at risk; and they do not explore other way of keeping themselves safe.

A physician once told me he really likes counselling his patients, but he felt that he was not very good at it. He said he often gives them advice on what they can do to improve their health. I tried to ask how often they took that advice and before I finished the question he held up his hands forming a “0” with his fingers. We seldom take other peoples advice, and more often follow the solution we find within ourselves. Our best solutions/actions come when we fully explore the problem/situation and understand fully the consequences of our planned solutions/actions. When the peer understands that though their best intentions in helping (fixing) are not very useful and what can be useful to offer is acceptance without judgment it is easier for them to refrain from “fixing”

The concept of no fixing/no advice also protects the agency from peers directing clients into situations that can be problematic. By not directing the client into action the agency can feel comfortable that the peers volunteering for them will not be directing people into situations that may cause the clients problems..

There is always the place for education. If the peer has information that the client needs then of course the peer will provide factual information for the client.

For example, there is a person who asks the helpful peer counsellor “Where are the toilets?”

The helpful peer reflects back ‘You’re anxious to find a toilet.’

The person seeking a toilet responds with a quick retort of “Yes, now where is it?”

The helpful peer responds about: ‘You feel frustration at not being told where the toilet is.’

This can go on and on and the helpful peer may be very good at listening and understanding the needs of the person looking for the toilet. In this case, it is obvious that by having factual information the client does not have, but needs, he can help him immensely and his NANNIE approach to the situation is not so helpful. Here helpful peer tells the person directly where the toilet is; but as in all situations, the helpful peer does not tell him what to do with the information. In other words, the helpful peer provides the information and leaves the client the option to act as he wishes as to how to use the facts.

The effective peer also will make sure that the subject being discussed is fully explored before he offers factual information. It can be easy for a peer to do more educating than listening. There is a place for education but it must not be entered into to quickly and only when necessary. Usually it is better to provide factual information at the end of a session.

NO QUESTIONS

The idea of the peers not asking questions is the most difficult aspect of the NANNIE approach for the peers to integrate into their practice. There can be many different aspects to the desire to ask questions.

The most common reasons for peers wanting to ask questions are:

- Desire to fix
- Desire to influence others
- Curiosity
- To more fully understand a situation
- Voyeurism
- To take control of the interview

The next concept we will discuss is “it is not about you”. But before that, let’s explore the “No Questions aspect. Looking at the list above, all of these relate to the peer counsellor and not to the client. To be effective the peer needs to keep their focus on the client and not on their own needs. The questions are usually come from needs of the peer.

Asking questions also sets up the client to explore what the peer counsellor thinks is important. This takes away from the client exploring his own issues his way. Asking questions disrupts the client’s natural process of exploration and moves the discussion to what the peer counsellor wants to discuss. Asking questions tends to put the peer counsellor in control and not the client.

It is a new and different concept for the peer counsellors to find ways to assist the client to explore a situation without questions, rather than leading the client to some place the peer wants him to go. The effective peer will find a way to introduce a concept without asking a question. The peer of course wishes to assist exploration of issues in the broadest way possible.

An example of changing a question to a reflective statement would be:

Why don't you?

Have you tried?

Have you considered?

The effective peer might say:

You are not sure how to move forward.

You cannot find a way to solve this.

You have considered many options and you are not sure what is best for you.

It sounds like it is hard for you to make a decision when you are not sure what is best.

You know what you think you should do but it is hard for you always to do that.

Another example might be:

How did you feel about?

Did you feel?

The effective peer might say:

It seems like you had some strong feelings about that.

It was hard for you not to react to that situation.

The responses of the effective peer give very broad areas to respond. The client can explore any aspect that they feel is important for them. The questions tend to narrow and shut down exploration of the situation. The goal is for full exploration of the issue(s) and possible action the client wishes to consider.

Sometimes the peer counsellor is just curious about the situation that is being described. The peer may want to know what happened next, or how someone responded to a situation.

A client may talk about his vacation at great length and the peer may ask: "Where did you go? Have you been there before? How was the weather? Did you enjoy the sun? These types of questions do not enhance the client's understand of the issue but are for the peer. Of course, the peer is not there to have his curiosity needs met. He is there for the client.

By staying away from asking questions, the peer counsellor keeps his focus on the client. The questions do not get in the way of the expression of the situation and feelings of the client. By not asking questions, the peer also clearly demonstrates a focus on the content of what he is being told. The focus remains on the client and his needs not the peer's needs.

Because the peer is not "fixing" the client, he does not need to understand details, (like where he went on his vacation.) In one teaching situation, I did a counselling demonstration for over half an hour and I had no idea of what the problem was that the client was talking about. I did not need to know because I was not fixing or

giving advice but my role was to help him to explore the situation, explore his options and consider the effects of what action he may take. He reported that this was very helpful to sort out the problem and more clearly understand the complexity of his situation. Yes, as a counsellor, I was curious about what the problem/situation was about but I never did learn what the concern was about. And I never needed to know. --
- It was not about me.

IT IS NOT ABOUT YOU

The concept of it is not about you brings together all the above concepts. It is not about what the peer thinks or feels about a situation. It is not about the peer telling someone what to do. It is not about the peers judgments. It is not about the peers own reaction to what they are being told. It is about the client!

The “it is not about you” aspect of the NANNIE method helps the peer to stay out of the way of the client telling his of situation. This concept helps the peer to remain accepting, non-judgmental, focused on the client.

The peers are asked to not have their ego involved in the counselling process. It is important to be focused on the client, and detached from their own needs and desires. This can be difficult for some peers. Letting go of self and putting the focus on the client is the important aspect of the peer’s efforts.

PUTTING “NANNIE” ALL TOGETHER

What peers find hard to do.

Consistently, peers that participate in the training report that the hardest part for them is accepting (and understanding) that:

- It is not about you
- No Questions
- No Fixing

It is important to spend extra time on these three aspects of the NANNIE method. These three aspects all relate to the peers intervening, controlling, directing. Once the peers understand that not only is this not helpful but also that people will find their own solutions, without the aid of advice or fixes.

The desire to ask questions often comes from wanting to feel in control. The effective peer is not in control of the discussion. He allows the client to talk about what he needs to talk about. If the peer is in control of the discussion than it most certainly, is not about him (the client)! He must leave his ego and curiosity behind and only focus on fully understanding the experience of the client.

The message about not fixing and no questions needs to be continuously reinforced and modeled by the trainer. There is often such a strong desire to ask questions that the peers while learning the method will not even be aware that they are asking questions. Often the peers are lost of how to proceed without questions in the early stages of training. Extra help and support often needs to be provided to assist the peers to understand how to proceed without asking questions. The questions often can be re-worded to be a reflective statement for the client. The trainer needs to demonstrate how to reframe questions into reflections is the best way of supporting the peers in learning a very new way of communicating.

THE ROLE-PLAY PRACTICE OF THE NANNIE METHODS

Role-play is the best way for people to learn the peer counselling skills. The idea of role-playing can be very difficult for people and cause a lot of anxiety. It often seems like the goal is to find the best words to put together to make a counselling response. The understanding of how to do this and what the concepts are behind it are difficult to grasp.

The initial role-playing is designed to explore the concepts of the NANNIE method and understand how to apply them. The role-plays are important to be realistic therefore; people should use something real in their life to talk about. It does not have to be a big problem but something to talk about that has real meaning for the person talking about their problem.

The peer counsellor has an assistant helping him to explore what was said and how he might respond. Each time before the peer responds to the person with the problem he discussed what was heard with the assistant and they also discuss what is the content of the concept that needs to be addressed. The peer develops his own wording for the response. The person with the problem listens to the discussion with absolutely no comment. The client learns more about how are many different ways one can interpret something that is said. As he listens to the discussion, he also learns what was heard and how someone might respond to what was heard. The peer counsellor learns how to phrase a response in his own words. He may check this out with his assistant before he replies. The assistant makes sure that he is always consulted before there is any response from the counsellor, and the assistant helps the peer counsellor to work out a response.

Practicing using counselling skills

Practice in using counselling skills is the most important part of the learning. The goal of the training is to provide ample time to practice using the skills presented, in an easy non-threatening situation. It is very important for the peers to see the NANNIE Method used in front of the class. Observing the NANNIE Method and using the skills in the NANNIE Method will demonstrate how to be a good peer counsellor. This will be the beginning of the learning process. When the practice begins the peers will learn how hard they may find it is for them to apply the NANNIE Method. Support and practice will help them achieve the skills in the end.

The peers can practice the skills with their family and friends. There is ample time to practice these skills outside the training situation. It is also important that the trainer(s) demonstrate the use of these skills is all aspects of the training.

Observing counselling skills in action

It is important for the trainer to assist the trainees with difficulties they may be having in the role-play. The trainer will walk around observing role-plays and noting issues and difficulties that come up. The role plays are the time when real learning and integration happens so it is important that the trainer make the role play a maximal learning experience. Reinforcement of good use of the method is very important. When the trainer sees trainees doing an effective use of the NANNIE Method it is important to recognize this with support.

Becoming proficient in using the skills

After the trainees become more comfortable with the NANNIE Method, they then move to a one on one role play situation. This can be challenging at first but often the trainees feel good to be able to respond spontaneously without checking with another person first. There tends to be much more enthusiasm in the room when one on one role-plays begin. Once the trainees begin to feel comfortable with using the Method they tend to seek opportunities for additional role-plays. This stage of proficiency is often half to two thirds through the training schedule. Remember in the training the same skills are used by the trainer(s), that is: support, no judgment, no questions, and understanding!

Identifying areas of difficulty

It is important that each peer explore what they are having difficulty with during the training process. The peers need to freely discuss the areas that they are having problems and special attention should be given to how to overcome the problems that peers are having in applying the Model. During the role-play the instructor will observe many different situations and they can bring into whole group discussion discussions about problems and difficulties observed in the role plays.

Most common challenges for peers are:

No questions

No fixing/advice

It is not about you

Help with “No Questions”

The peers often need help understanding why asking questions are not helpful.

When a peer asks a questions they are directing the discussion to the concerns that the peer wants to explore. This takes the focus away from what the client wants to talk about.

Asking questions is also a way of the peer taking control of the counselling process where the control should always remain with the client.

Asking questions by the peer also sets up the peer as the expert. “Just answer my questions ... and I will fix you.”

Asking questions is not communicating acceptance, empathy, and respect for the client.

The questioning is done for the peers benefit and not for the clients benefit.

Often the desire to ask questions is for the benefit of the peer understanding more about a particular situation. The peer does not need: facts, context, and explanations, to be helpful. The peer is reflecting the feelings

connected to a situation but the peer does not need to know and understand the situation to show acceptance and empathic understanding of the feelings.

The peers soon learn when they want to ask questions and refrain from doing so that at the end of the session they will most of the time understand that the information that they “desperately needed to know” really is not important and listening and communicating empathically with the client is all that is necessary.

The questions are for the peers not the clients.

- Peers can feel in control of the counselling
- Understand a context better (which is not necessary to be helpful)
- Sometimes it is just voyeurism and curiosity

Peers can be helped to understand why they want to ask questions and can find some reflective ways to address the issue at hand.

Below are some examples of how questions can become reflective statement:

Why did you do that?

Sounds like you are: (not sure/or do not feel good about/or feel pleased/ or ...) that you did that.

Is your father still alive?

Does the peer really need to know this, likely not. If a peer wishes to ask such a question; then he sees that the client is concerned about their relationship with their father. Therefore, a reflective statement about the relationship with the father seems appropriate here. “Your relationship with your father (is/ important/or difficult) to/for you.”

How do you feel about that?

Here empathy comes in. Can the peer understand the feelings of the client? If they are confused about the feelings the client has then they may feel that a reflective statement like: “It sounds like you have lots of different feeling about that.”

Peers need to understand that the questions are not helpful for the client, they distract from counselling, from understand, and from acceptance, and from exploration. However, the peers often need to find other ways to communicate understanding without asking questions. Lot of practice in large groups of looking at ways to avoid questions by exploring alternatives is very helpful.

No Fixing/No Advice

Peers find giving advice to be the easiest thing for them to do. By peers not giving advice not fixing, they sometimes feel not useful. One person explained that they felt the clients got a lot out of this type of counselling but felt that “their cat could do it”. They were not fixing, telling others what to do, and they felt worthless. This can be especially true of persons who are trained in a job where their value is to give advice

and tell others how to behave. Doctors and nurses find this approach very difficult when they cannot give solutions and fix other peoples situations.

One of the unspoken messages given to the client when they are given advice is that the clients are not capable to finding their own solutions to their problems. The clients are in effect told that they cannot run their life but need someone else to tell them what to do. While most people feel that it is helpful to give advice, the reality is that it is seldom taken or implemented. The advice is not usually useful and is given more for the benefit of the helper. When the peers learn that clients can find their own solution to their problems then it becomes easier for the peers to avoid fixing.

It Is Not About You – It IS About Him (the client)

This one is a broad statement about the peers understanding that their own opinions and experiences are not part of the counselling process. The peers may have some feelings about what is being talked about but they need to work hard to avoid this affecting the counselling. The peers must understand that their feelings are not part of the process of counselling. “It is not about you” is to keep the focus on the client and not on the peer. So often, the peer will want to tell stories about their own experiences as a way of showing empathy, and offering solutions. “It is not about you,” conveys that it is about the client! The peer support process involves the peer not having ego involvement in the process, and focuses on the client’s feelings, experiences and needs.

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