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Teaching Effective and Empathetic Communication Amongst Social Service Volunteers

Jillian L. Van Every

A Capstone project for the Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Studies

Teaching Effective and Empathetic Communication Amongst Social Service Volunteers

Introduction

Some volunteers working with homeless clientele may lack effective communication skills needed while working with this population. As a result, volunteers may not form a trusting relationship with the clients and limit their ability to provide effective services. As a result, I have created a one-day training for volunteers at the Gathering For Women in Monterey, California.

Needs Statement

In the world of human services, effective communication can be a vital tool to properly assist those in need. One component of effective communication is conveying empathy (Wittenberg-Lyles et al., 2012). Empathy is often needed in order to understand issues, build trusting relationships, and meet the needs of client populations (Bayne et al., 2012). Empathetic communication can show clientele that a given organization understands their needs (Wittenberg-Lyles et al., 2012). Mistrust may lead participants to believe that the currently available services are not compatible with their needs (Kryda, & Compton, 2009). For clientele who are homeless or housing insecure, effective communication from human service workers may be particularly critical because of life circumstances that may have led to the homelessness. Without having effective communication between homeless individuals and human services workers, homeless populations may not be able to receive the proper care they need.

Mistrust from homeless individuals is one example of how the lack of effective communication can have a negative effect on possible services offered and received. Some homeless individuals connected mistrust of a specific worker to mistrust with the overall organization (Kryda & Compton, 2009). There is a critical need for a respectful, holistic approach

that addresses the personal perceived needs of those who are homeless if homelessness is to be effectively addressed (Kryda, & Compton, 2009).

Many non-profit organizations rely on the support of dedicated volunteers. The success of a non-profit relies on volunteers being motivated to volunteer, as well as sustaining their volunteering over time (Alfes, Shantz & Bailey, 2016). Many times, the ability to communicate effectively is assumed in volunteer work, while training and assessment in the areas are largely neglected (Leonard, Graham, & Bonacum, 2004). More complex training programs for volunteers are needed to emphasize listening techniques to help deal with delicate and complex issues they may encounter (Rajashree, 2011).

By deepening volunteers' understanding of compassionate communication, services for the homeless population can be improved. Four compassionate communication practices are: presence, nonverbal immediacy, organizational immediacy, and acts of service (Huffman, 2017). In Huffman's (2017) study, ...with volunteers being present and consistently showing up, homeless individuals felt more compassion from this act versus actual services that were provided. Homeless individuals can tell when a volunteer truly cares and wants to be there. Showing compassion can also come from nonverbal cues such as turning towards someone with their eyes, face and body. Facial cues and body language can be very effective in demonstrating compassion to homeless individuals who often receive dirty looks and judgement in public (Huffman, 2017).

One of the main problems with impeding policy changes regarding treatment of the homeless is that many Americans have indifferent or even negative attitudes toward homeless people (Hocking & Lawrence, 2000). Since the 1960s, studies have shown that empathy is an important force in effecting positive therapeutic change as well as policy changes (Truax et al.,

1966). When and if volunteers assess their own biases and stereotypes they may hold, it can allow for a deeper connection to form between clients and personnel. Empathy is used to build a relationship, which is key for gaining access to important information and helping the client feel accepted. (Bayne et al., 2012). This acceptance and feeling of safety are important amongst homeless individuals who are receiving social services. This is because the American public is starting to lose compassion and have become increasingly hostile to homeless individuals (Link et al., 1995).

Training programs have been successful at teaching active listening and empathetic responses for human service workers. The use of paraphrase and summary statements, as well as general reflections of feeling, can help clarify client perspectives and lead to goal setting (Bayne et al., 2012). Teaching programs for human service workers could improve by instead of teaching empathy as a basic communication skill, to teach it as a core professional skill that can be applied in providing services to individuals, families, groups, and communities. Therefore, I created a 1-day lesson focused on effective, empathetic communication for volunteers at Gathering for Women, a homeless women's service organization located in Monterey, California.

Theory

Albert Bandura, in his Social Learning Theory, theorized that people learn from observing others. He believed that behavior is learned through the environment through observational learning. While modeling the learned behavior is important, the motivation to model the behavior is based on the recognition by the learners that what they model is important (DeWitt, 2003). New volunteers, the "learners", will recognize that the services they are

providing to the homeless women community is important, and they will model the behavior of effective empathetic communication because they are motivated to do so.

Bandura stated that there are four conditions needed in the modeling process (Nabavi, 2012). The first is attention, with learners needing to pay attention to the model. The second is retention, with observers needing to remember the behavior they observed. The third condition is reproduction, with learners having the ability to replicate the modeled behavior demonstrated. The final condition is motivation, with learners needing to want to model what they learned (Nabav, 2012).

The first two conditions will take place during the new volunteers training workshop with volunteers paying attention to the information given, as well as retaining what was taught. Bandura's "behavior reproduction" component will then be applied to my content with direct exposure. This will be used after the workshop when volunteers must take what they learned and use it while interacting with the homeless women. After what they have learned, they will hopefully be motivated to adjust their behavior to continue following the empathic communication approach they observed.

Consideration of Diversity

My project will be conducted at Gathering for Women's new volunteer training in Monterey, California. While it is not required for volunteers to be female, most of them are. There is a very limited number of male volunteers. My project is tailored to the female volunteers working with the female homeless clientele. I will be conducting my lesson in English, so proficiency in English will be needed to participate. Those individuals who are not English proficient may be excluded from the project. I am assuming that volunteers have extra

spare time in their schedules to dedicate to this organization because they are choosing to supply their services for free, which may be connected to their social class status.

One issue of diversity of the content is that the content would change based on whom the volunteers are focusing. For my workshop, the focus is empathetic and effective communication with homeless individuals. The content would need to be adjusted if the volunteers were for example working with at risk youth. For example, if this were to be applied to youth, the delivery would need to be altered based on what stage they are at in their cognitive development, whether the stage being sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operations or formal operational.

Gathering for Women is strictly an organization serving homeless women that does not offer services to homeless men. The content offered in my workshop may need to be altered to show effective communication styles for men. One way I could create more opportunities for inclusivity is to offer my workshop in Spanish. I could create worksheets in Spanish and have a lesson available for Spanish speakers. Some clients at Gathering for Women are Spanish speaking dominant and it would be more inclusive to provide training for volunteers in Spanish to better serve the Spanish speaking population.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of my project, participants...

1. Demonstrate at least one key communication skill
2. Identify at least two different empathetic approaches to communication
3. Revise two non-empathetic communication prompts to contain more effective empathetic language

Method

Day 1

First, I introduced myself and explained that I was going to teach the importance and application of effective, empathetic communication. I conducted a presentation that first gave an overview of what effective communication is and specific skills of effective communication. See Appendix A. After the 10-minute presentation, I asked if anyone had any questions or thoughts to add.

Next, I continued the presentation but now focused on detailing the importance of empathy in social services. See Appendix A. In the presentation, I highlighted the importance of active listening and trust when it comes to interactions with the clientele. After the 10-minute presentation, I again asked if there were any questions or additional commentary. I then passed out a worksheet and asked volunteers to write down at least two different approaches that display empathetic communication. See Appendix B. After about 5 minutes, I led a discussion on what the volunteers had written.

After a 10-minute discussion on the overview of what was presented, the volunteers watched me interact with a client. This interaction took place while I provided service to a woman who came to the Clothes Closet at Gathering for Women. After the new volunteers watched two interactions between myself and a client, I passed out a worksheet for the volunteers to complete. On the worksheet volunteers revised two non-empathetic communication prompts to instead contain more effective empathetic communication. See Appendix C. After giving them 10 minutes to revise the prompts, we together discussed how individuals uniquely chose to reword the sentences to display a more effective and empathetic approach. After a review of everyone's prompts, the workshop ended with an explanation of the importance of

displaying empathy in human services. Volunteers also asked any follow up questions about the workshop or what is expected of them as volunteers.

Results

Incomplete due to Covid-19

Discussion

Incomplete due to Covid-19

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*Appendix A**Powerpoint on empathy and communication*

The Importance of Effective and Empathetic Communication



What is Effective Communication?

Simply put...

Effective communication is a process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, knowledge and information such that the purpose or intention is fulfilled in the best possible manner.



Communication skills

Common areas that need improvement:

1. Listening
2. Understanding non-verbal cues
3. Emotional awareness
4. Questioning




Listening

- Different than “hearing”
- Active listening involves listening with all senses
- Verbal and Non-Verbal cues to convey listening (ex. Eye contact, nodding your head)
- Asking relevant questions



Non-verbal Cues

- Body language:
Ex: body movement, eye contact, posture, facial expression, tone of voice and even physiological changes such as sweating.
- Gives clues about one's emotional state



Emotional Awareness

Emotional Intelligence of one's own emotions:

- The personal skills include self-awareness, self-regulation and motivation.

Emotional Intelligence of others emotions:

- The social skills include empathy and social skills.



Questioning

- Shows and offers clarity about someone's message
- Allows listener to obtain more information



What is Empathetic Communication?

Definition of *empathy*:

the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner



Empathy in Social Services

- “Social empathy, grounded in perspective taking, can provide a deeper understanding of certain ethnic minority groups”(Eriksson & Englander, 2017)
- Understanding point of view
- Building trust
- Assessing biases



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Appendix B

Worksheet completion for Learning outcome 2

What are two different ways to show empathetic communication:

1.

2.

*Appendix C**Worksheet completion for Learning outcome 3*

Revise the following prompts to contain more effective and empathetic language:

Example: A client walks in and starts talking about her day to day challenges of being homeless. She mentions her battle with drug abuse. She is hard for you to understand due to a language barrier between you.

Revise this response:

“Uhh what did you say, I wasn’t paying attention. Could you speak up? All I know is I was taught to never do drugs so I can’t relate to your bad choices.”

Example: A woman comes in and needs help working the computer so she could look for a job. She mentions how she lost her last job, which is why she is currently homeless.

Revise this response:

“I can’t believe you don’t have a job. It’s not that hard to get one. I’m too busy right now just figure it out yourself.”

Final Capstone Presentation

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHETIC AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Jillian Van Every

NEED STATEMENT

Without having effective communication between homeless individuals and human services workers, homeless populations may not be able to receive the proper care they need.

INTRODUCTION

I created a 1-day lesson focused on effective, empathetic communication for volunteers working in social services.



THEORY

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

- Observational learning will be a tool to teach volunteers
- Steps of the modeling process: Attention, Retention, Reproduction, Motivation
- Using "behavior reproduction" volunteers will alter their behavior to fit a more empathetic and effective approach



METHOD

Day 1:

- Presentation on the overview of effective communication
- Presentation on empathy
- New volunteers complete a worksheet displaying two empathetic approaches to providing service

Worksheet:

What are two different ways to show empathetic communication:

1. _____
2. _____

PRESENTATION

The Importance of Effective and Empathetic Communication

What is Empathetic Communication?

Definition of empathy:
 The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experiences fully communicated in an identifiable verbal form.

METHOD

Day 1 continued:

- Volunteers observed an interaction where empathetic effective communication is used
- Volunteers revised two non-empathetic communication prompts to instead contain more effective empathetic communication

WORKSHEET:

Revise the following prompts to contain more effective and empathetic language:

Example: A client walks in and starts talking about her day to day challenges of being homeless. She mentions her battle with drug abuse. She is hard for you to understand due to a language barrier between you.

Revise this response:
 "Uhh what did you say, I wasn't paying attention. Could you speak up? All I know is I was taught to never do drugs so I can't relate to your bad choices."

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of my project, participants...

1. Demonstrate at least one key communication skill
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RESULTS

Not available due to Covid-19

DISCUSSION

Not available due to Covid-19

THANK YOU!



QUESTIONS?