Workbook 1.2
Person Centred Practice Across Cultures

Active Listening—
unconditional positive regard across cultures

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About National Disability Services
National Disability Services is the peak body for non-government disability services. Its purpose is to promote quality service provision and life opportunities for people with disability. NDS’s Australia-wide membership includes more than 1000 non-government organisations, which support people with all forms of disability. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to state, territory and federal governments.
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1. Preface

This workbook is part of a series of resources for the disability services sector designed by futures Upfront for NDS with funding provided by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services; Ageing, Disability and Home Care.

1. Individual Practices – working with people from CALD backgrounds with disability

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This workbook is part of “Individual Practices – working with people from CALD backgrounds with disability” series.

1.1 How to use this workbook?

This workbook can be used in many different ways, including:

- As a self-paced learning program by an individual
1.2 What is this workbook about?

This workbook is designed to build on and strengthen your active listening skills. Using an attitude of unconditional positive regard, your active listening skills will be strengthened to work more effectively across cultures. As with all strength-based, person centred approaches the purpose is to assist your focus on people’s potential and opportunities. This workbook invites you to think about culture as one of those potentials, an opportunity and a ‘gift’ to explore and build on.

We recommend you also use the other workbooks in the “Individual Practices – working with people from CALD backgrounds with disability” series.

1.3 Outcomes

At the end of the workbook you will:

- Be able to identify the core elements of active listening
- Think about those elements and how they work cross culturally
- Explore positive unconditional regard as a attitude to assist your active listening

1.4 Who is this workbook for?

- People interested in improving their culturally responsive person centred practice
- People who want to strengthen their listening skills across cultures
- People who want to know more about unconditional positive regard as a practice

1.5 How long will it take to complete?

This workbook should take about 45 minutes to work through and watch some of the videos.
2. The Workbook

2.1 What is active listening?

With active listening being identified by many people as one of the core skills in delivering services in a person centred way, it might be useful to get a shared understanding of active listening, the core elements of active listening are and a better understanding of what makes a good listener.

2.1.1 A definition

It is always good to start with a definition. The reasons we focus on active listening – not just merely listening – is that active listening requires engagement from the listener. Active listening asks you to be fully engaging and responding to what is being communicated.

Here is one way of thinking about active listening:

“(active listening) requires that we get inside the speaker, that we grasp, from his [sic] point of view, just what it is he is communicating to us. More than that, we must convey to the speaker that we are seeing things from his point of view”

This quote from Carl Rogers is a great introduction to active listening, because it highlights that there is so much more to active listening than just hearing someone.

Reflections

Do you think active listening is an important skill when working with people? What do you do when you are actively listening?

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1 Rogers, C and Farson, R: Active listening http://wholebeinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/Rogers_Farson_ActiveListening.pdf
2.1.2 The core elements of active listening

Different experts have identified slightly different elements as being core to active listening.

Below a bit of a summary from mindtools.com who have also produced a video if you prefer to watch rather than/as well as read.

Video

https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm

They identify 5 key elements:

1. Paying Attention
   ✓ Give the speaker your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also "speaks" loudly.
   ✓ Look at the speaker directly.
   ✓ Put aside distracting thoughts.
   ✓ Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!
   ✓ Avoid being distracted by environmental factors. For example, side conversations

2. Showing that you are listening
   ✓ Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.
   ✓ Nod occasionally.
   ✓ Smile and use other facial expressions.
   ✓ Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting.
   ✓ Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like ‘yes’, and ‘mmhh’

3. Providing Feedback
   ✓ Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being
said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask questions.

- Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing. "What I'm hearing is," and "Sounds like you are saying," are great ways to reflect back.

- Ask questions to clarify certain points. "What do you mean when you say." "Is this what you mean?"

- Summarize the speaker's comments periodically.

4. Defer Judgment

- Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions.

- Don't interrupt with counter arguments.

5. Respond Appropriately

- Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting him or her down.

- Be candid, open, and honest in your response.

- Assert your opinions respectfully.

- Treat the other person in a way that you think he or she would want to be treated.²

On the other hand Carl Rogers, who can be called one of the ‘fathers’ of person centred approaches, digs much deeper and yet, at the same time, gives us much less of a ‘list’ and more of way of being with his 3 critical elements of listening:

- Listen for total meaning (both content and feeling/attitude)

- Respond to feelings (acknowledge the feelings in your communication)

- Note all clues (much of communication is non-verbal)³

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² from: [https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm](https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm)
Reflections

Thinking about your own list in your reflections in 2.1.1 above. Does your list of active listening match the elements above or are there differences?

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2.1.3 What makes a good listener?

We all love being listened to properly, but many of us have never been taught how to listen. The School of Life, an organisation committed to develop emotional intelligence through the help of culture, has developed 4 tips on how to be a good listener:

1. Encourage people to elaborate
2. Urge Clarification: don’t assume – clarify
3. Don’t moralise: accept that we are all vulnerable
4. Separate your disagreement from criticising the person

As with all skills, they need to be practiced and used regularly.

Video

Here is a link to a short video if you are interested.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdbiZcNBXg
Reflections

Rogers talks about active listening as getting inside the speaker, trying to grasp or understand the world from another person's point of view. Can you think about how you do this? Or maybe you remember last time someone really actively listened to you?

2.2 Active listening cross-culturally

Communication styles vary across cultures. There is a whole field of study called cross-cultural communication (as well as inter-cultural communication). Just put those words in your search engine and there will be an explosion of links on your screen.

Will active listening, as one of the skills of person centred practice, work across all cultures and situations?

Let’s ‘test’ one element from the list above.

For example, one of the active listening tips above is to make eye contact. Yet, many people say that men and women communicate differently and that they listen differently. Men are said to stand next to each other without much eye contact to talk about important things, while women are said to have a lot of eye contact and face each other. Many of us have also heard that looking directly into the eyes of an elder is a sign of disrespect in many cultures, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, while exactly the opposite is true for other cultures.

In actively listening to people who are different from ourselves, will we all have to learn about how active listening works in different cultures?

Just thinking about ethnicity alone – there are people from over 200 different countries living in Australia and that is not taking into account all the differences and changes within those communities. And on top of that,
we also know that no cultural stereotype is true for all members of a community. The above examples are not true for all men nor all women, nor for all members of a particular cultural group.

Therefore specific cultural knowledge, about active listening in our case, may or may not be useful, because it may or may not be applicable in a particular situation with a particular individual.

Where to from here or is it all too complicated?

Below a few ways to think through this:

2.2.1 1 person, 1 community @ a time

You already know from your person centred training, it is all about the individual. No two people are the same, even if they have the same disability, or the same gender or the same ethnic background. It is always one person at a time. It’s all about the individual.

2.2.2 Keep listening and learning

When thinking about active listening, it is important to think of it just as one of your skills. One skill will never work in all situations. Working with human beings is not like being an electrician; we are not wired to standard specifications.

We can use active listening and we can also learn more about different aspects of communicating as you work with someone who is different from you.

2.2.3 Use your other person centred practice skills

Carl Rogers above said active listening is to grasp someone’s meaning from their point of view. This means it is the role of the listener to try and step outside their own way of seeing something and trying on someone else’s experience.

We recommend that you have a look at the other workbooks in this series, especially Workbook 1.1 on empathy and Workbook 1 on reflective practice.

To guide us in our active listening skills across different cultures, there is one concept or idea that is particularly useful here. This is the idea of – ‘unconditional positive regard’.

2.3 Unconditional Positive Regard

We have already mentioned Carl Rogers above. He was a psychologist who introduced the idea of unconditional positive regard. He thought of it as an attitude to adopt, an attitude that starts from the basic acceptance and support of a person regardless of what the person says or does.

If you stop to think about this, it is a very powerful action:
‘To accept a person, regardless of what they have said or done.’

Unconditional positive regard is not unconditional love, in fact, you really do not have to love the other person, you might not even like them, but you accept and support them.

Rogers was a therapist and he developed a therapeutic approach called ‘client centred’ therapy. This workbook is not for therapists and your work with people with disability is not therapy, but that does not mean we cannot learn from what he thought were important elements in people ‘becoming and being’. Especially as so much of what he talked about forms the basis of our thinking in person centred approaches.

Rogers also has a strong focus on empathy (another workbook in this series) and honesty (or congruence as Rogers calls it).

If you bring a mindset, an attitude, of unconditional positive regard to your active listening, your listening will become much more open and accepting of whatever a person tells you.

As you become more open and more accepting you will also become more noticing and while you may make cross-cultural mistakes, there is a better chance you notice quicker and then you can just say so “Oh I just noticed that making eye-contact might not be appropriate in your culture. If that’s the case I apologise.” And then you move on.

Coming from a position of unconditional positive regard, your whole way of thinking about the other person is about accepting them who they are (and trying not to make judgements about them). With a mindset of unconditional positive regard you can practise being more open and looking towards cultural differences as an asset and a different way of thinking that might assist in doing your work alongside another person.

As you practise your active listening will become more focused on the other person and less focused on your inner chatter (“What inner chatter?” you ask? Well, the one that’s asking that question right now.)

Video

If you are now more interested in Rogers and want to know more, here a link to a You tube clip called ‘Rogers In Ten Minutes’

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvejEpDRHmU
Reflections

What do you think about bringing an unconditional positive regard mindset to your active listening? What does it take for you to do that? Are there circumstances that will make it easier/harder for you?

Workbook Exercise

Below is part of a case study we introduced in another workbook. Can you have a read, and identify how active listening and how an attitude of unconditional positive regard could have led to a different outcome?

Case study

Diana is a young woman from Chinese background with physical disability. She was born in Australia and speaks fluent English and Mandarin and speaks both languages equally at home. She lives with her mum who came to Australia as an adult and speaks little English. Her father passed away a couple of years ago.

Diana made contact with a rehabilitation service to get some help with employment and specialist equipment. The first meeting with the case manager occurred at Diana’s home. The case manager spent some time gathering background information about Diana’s circumstances. Then she advised Diana about the need to be more independent and that she should start to plan towards moving out of

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4 Case studies used with the permission of DDAlliance (www.ddalliance.org.au)
Case study

home. Throughout the conversation the case manager kept referring to Diana’s mum as ‘your carer’ and suggested that she would appreciate ‘having her own space’.

A couple of days later Diana called the case manager and told her that she no longer required any service.
3. Conclusion

This workbook aimed to assist you in strengthening your active listening skills and give you an idea of the concept of unconditional positive regard to help you listen well cross culturally.

You may also want to have a look at some of the other workbooks relating specifically to “Individual Practices – working with people from CALD backgrounds with disability” series.

Reflections

What are some of the take away messages from this workbook? Are there things you disagree with? Was there something that surprised you?

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