

Boosting Client Engagement in Counselling: Effective Strategies for Professional Counsellors

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Abstract

Effective client engagement is a cornerstone of successful counselling and it is crucial for achieving positive therapeutic outcomes. However, many counsellors face challenges in establishing and maintaining strong, sustained relationships with clients, leading to issues such as reduced client retention and limited therapeutic progress. This article explores practical strategies that counsellors can implement to enhance client engagement, including active listening, the use of open-ended questions, empathy, non-verbal communication, cultural sensitivity, and collaborative goal setting. These strategies are designed to foster trust, create a participation in the counselling process.

The paper emphasizes the importance of counsellors honing these core skills, adhering to ethical standards, and avoiding practices that may compromise the effectiveness of the therapeutic relationship. Furthermore, the article advocates for the professional body for counsellors in Nigeria, CASSON, to strengthen its efforts in educating and training its members on relationship-building techniques and client engagement.

By focusing on these strategies, counsellors can improve the therapeutic alliance, ultimately leading to higher levels of client commitment, retention, and overall satisfaction with the counselling process.

Cultivating rapport, trust, and a supportive environment is fundamental to ensuring that clients remain engaged and motivated throughout their therapeutic journey, paving the way for successful and impactful counselling outcomes.

Keywords: Client; Active Listening; Open-Ended Questions; Non-Verbal Communication; Cultural Sensitivity

Introduction

One of the tasks of professional counsellors is delivering to their clients counselling services that will lead them to self-awareness and overall development. Professional counsellors do this by ensuring that the services rendered are genuine and serve as basis for understanding the purpose of the profession. Kushendar (2018) corroborated this by asserting that the service provided by the counsellor is intended to assist individuals in need of personal development and problem-solving. Andrian (2014) posits that, by mastering good personality competencies, counsellors can serve as good role models for their clients, and furthermore, counsellors who possess good personality competencies support the success of counselling services.

Counselling as a helping profession involves the relationship between two individuals; a professional and the other person who needs help. This relationship is a professional engagement that revolves round the two individuals co-operating together to achieve a goal. The quality of the co-operation between the two parties will go a long way in fostering the counselling goal. Wibowo (2017) opines that counselling is a helping profession. This forms the foundation for defining to the client the role of the counsellor.

Effective client engagement is important in any counselling relationship. This is necessary to build a strong therapeutic relationship, initiate trust, and foster positive counselling outcomes.

Counsellor's personality and strategies are important factors to facilitating client's interest and engagement in counselling relationships. Sari, Karneli & Hariko (2024) stated that the counsellor's personal qualities serve as a benchmark for achieving the success of counselling services. Additionally, the counsellor must be proficient in handling client's problems such that it will translate to a successful counselling engagement. With good counsellor's personal qualities; all counselling engagements will lead to success. One of the crucial ingredients for a successful counselling relationship to be possessed by a professional counsellor is competence. Competence here connotes counsellors presenting themselves to the client that they honestly and sincerely understand what they are doing. This will convince the client about the worth of the counsellor and relief him of any doubt against the counsellor's competency in handling his case.

Experiences have shown that, the level of client's self-disclosure is premised not only around issues of confidentiality but also that it has a link with the professional competence of counsellors. Clients are more likely to open up to a professionally sound counsellor and that at the same time, guarantees them the confidentiality of their secrets.

It is on the above premise that this paper seeks to provide an empirical bases of the strategies professional counsellors can use to handle clients cases in a more professional manner that will foster client's prompt, effective and voluntary patronage of their services.

Client Engagement

In any counselling relationship, effort should be geared towards developing a productive and meaningful relationship between the client and the counsellor. This is the key element for productive treatment outcomes.

Client engagement connotes all efforts made by the professional counsellor during therapeutic sessions, to achieve the desired results. According to Temkin (2008), client engagement refers to the process of creating deep connections with clients that drive decisions, interactions, and participation, over time. Holdsworth et. al. (2014) viewed engagement from the perspective of mental health experts, which can also be applied by the professional counsellor. Here, they see engagement as all the efforts made during therapy, right from the intake sessions, to achieve the desired results. It is a multifaceted construct with several domains such as communication, participation, and exchange of valuable information.

Client genuine engagement in counselling relationship is deeply hinged on the counsellor's personality and professional expertise. The environment created for the client can also make or mar the counselling encounter. For instance Carl Rogers, the humanistic psychologist, described the psychological environment in which an effective therapeutic relationship can occur as that environment free from threat, both physically and psychologically; this type of environment, according to Wendera (2008), can be achieved when the professional counsellor shows a deep understanding (empathic), acceptance (unconditional positive regard) and genuine interest (congruent) in the counselling relationship.

Thus, client engagement can be summarized as a healthy mutual relationship that has to do with motivating the client, sustaining his faith throughout the counselling sessions, and promoting positive outcome at the end of the counselling sessions.

Importance of Client Engagement in Counselling Encounter

The place of client engagement in a successful counselling session cannot be underestimated. Client engagement reflects the level of healthy attachment a client has with the counsellor, which directly impacts on the relationship. Client engagement is linked with positive therapeutic outcomes. Stanton & Shadish (1997), Wang (2006) indicated that one of the key components of success in therapeutic relationship is attributed to the therapist's capacity to engage and retain the client in the counselling relationship. Research by Black, Friedlander & Escudero (2006) on client's perception of therapy suggest that therapists' rapport, warmth, optimism, humor, and commitment are crucial aspects of effective treatment.

According to Augustine & Ukwueze (2022) the professional counsellor must possess an encouragement skill. This skill according to the writers is a skill that is described as an all-inclusive process of achieving counselling tasks. It involves both the counsellor and the client being actively involved in the counselling relationships. The skill enables the client to become active participant in order to establish and sustain her interest. Augustine & Ukwueze (2022) opined that, when

clients are involved in counselling like the Carl Roger's Client-Centered Therapy, a solid foundation of interaction, conversation and free expressions will be established. In view of this, professional counsellors must make sure that he/she initiates and engages the clients in discussions even if the clients shows repulsiveness or hide information due to lack of trust. In the process, a re-awakening attitude evolves in such a client, and because the client is involved in the process, that elusive trust is restored and the ultimate goal of the counselling will be achieved.

Delre et.al (2006) stated that client outcomes are constantly predicted by the counsellor's ability to build strong therapeutic alliances with the client from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. The counsellor developing the skills and ability to form a therapeutic alliance with the client is more productive of highly effective counselling than the type of counselling provided or the counsellor's qualifications, gender, caseload or age (Chow et. al., 2015). This type of relationship, in turn, improves client engagement and reduces the chance of client dropout.

Bowlby (1988) noted that, engaging clients from the introductory counselling session and sustaining the interest all along is essential for:

- Creating a safe environment for the client where he can express fearlessly.
- Exploring past achievements and failures that may be the source of current problems.
- Evaluating the pattern of attachment that the client has with other people in his life.
- Understanding how past relationships might be associated with his present conditions.
- Modifying thoughts, and actions to build positive relationships with his internal and external worlds.

Strategies for Boosting Client Engagement in Counselling

Every profession, including the counselling profession has a high-level plan of achieving goals in any situation. This is referred to as strategy. There are multiple strategies been put into use by professional counsellors, depending case at hand. As a matter of fact, counsellor's proficiency and knowledge of professional strategies determines the efficacy and efficiency of any counselling relationship. Thus, counselling strategies are the hallmark of professional counsellors.

To boost client interest in counselling, professional counsellors must acquaint themselves with; and understand the appropriate usage of the different counselling strategies at their disposal. These strategies include, but not limited to the following:

Active Listening: This is one of the most important professional characteristics to be possessed by professional counsellors. It is very necessary for client retention. It is a communication skill that is fundamental for effective counseling relationship. According to Okobia (1991), listening forms the basis upon which other higher-level helping responses are built. According to her, active listening on the part of the counsellor conveys the impression that:

- (i) He is genuinely interested in helping the client to solve his problem.
- (ii) The client is unconditionally accepted, regarded, and valued.

If the client on the other hand, does not enjoy the above from the counsellor in the course of the counselling relationship, his interest in the counselling relationship dwindles.

Levitt (2001) identifies active listening as a therapeutic micro-skill involving listening attentively and responding empathetically so a client feels heard. According to Janusik (2007), listening impacts uncertainty reduction and information management via comprehension and retention of a speaker's message.

Drollinger, Comer & Warrington (2006) posited that effective listeners generally project more positive impressions than ineffective listeners and are perceived to be more trustworthy and socially attractive.

Listening behaviours are linked to different attributes. For example, verbal phrases are associated with attentiveness and responsiveness while questions are linked to conversation management, attentiveness and responsiveness. Nonverbal behaviours on the other hand, for instance, body language, gestures and eye contact are linked to attentiveness, friendliness, and conversation management skills.

For professional counsellors to guarantee their clients of their prompt listening, and that they are decoding their stories, counsellors should take note and be aware of the client's body language, posture, tone of voice, empathy, and words.

Open-Ended Questions: It is important for the professional counsellors to make use of open-ended questions to boost the interest of their clients. This strategy enables the expression of thoughts, feelings and personal meanings. With open-ended questions, unlike closed-ended, the client is not restricted in his responses. It is also needed to allow client to freely express himself. This is needed by the counsellor for correct diagnosis. For instance, questions starting with 'how', 'when', 'where', are likely to generate better responses and openness than closed-ended questions like 'is it', 'don't you', 'would you say', 'could it', 'don't you think', and so on. These invite a yes or no response and allows client to be restricted to the confines of the questions.

Chinweuba & Aminu (2022) stated that in counselling, open-ended questioning seeks to elicit information from clients using "how" and "what" instead of "why". Open-ended questions according to the writers, can be answered in one word or in a phrase. The client is made to progress from generalisations to specifics with more detailed information and clarity of points.

Empathy: Egbochuku (2008) commented that emphatic responding is a vital part of active listening-hearing what the client says from the internal frame of reference and responding in such a way that the client knows and feels that the counsellor is striving to understand. According to Oladele (2007), empathy is the most effective means of promoting positive change in behaviour of the clients.

Empathy is best described as the counsellor walking in the client's shoes. It is creating awareness from the counsellor to the client that he feels the pains of the client as though they are in it together.

Egbochuku (2002) describes it as an expression of the regard and respect the counsellor holds for the client's whose frame of reference (the inner world including aspects of self: values, thoughts, meanings, feelings, cultural influences, experiences and perceptions) may be different from that of the counsellor. Oladele (2007) also corroborates this as he notes that empathy connotes the counsellor's ability to listen to and understand the voices, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, attitudes and experiences of the client. An empathic counsellor according to him, is able to assume the internal frame of reference of the client, to perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client as he is seen by himself.

Busari (2011) suggests that, for successful counselling, the counsellor should be empathic. He should be able to be at one with the client. He should be able to perceive the Counsellee as the latter perceives himself. He should possess the capacity for experiencing with another person's life, his feelings, the organization of his life and the impinging forces on the other's life.

When client sees that his pains and sorrows are being shared by the Counsellor, his interest in the counselling relationships is sustained. In been empathizing however, Busari (2011) warns that, the counsellor should still strive towards being able to perceive that he should avoid emotional entanglement with the counselee if he is going to help him.

Just as it is natural for humans to feel loved, client will feel free and comfortable with a counsellor who shows him love and convince him of sharing with his pains and burdens.

To boost client interest and willingness in counselling, professional counsellors should be proficient and encourage clients with their empathic nature.

Non-Verbal Communication: Communication is very essential in all counselling encounters. No counselling can take place in the absence of communication; be it verbal or non-verbal. Both the counsellor and the client must be able to communicate with one another. Non-verbal communication refers to transmitting information without using words or language. According to Sanusi & Dare (2023) basically, non-verbal communication involves communicating without the use of verbal codes (words) in a number of methods.

Client's interest in counselling relationship is boosted in the face of warm facial expression from the counsellor, constant welcoming eye contact, and frequent touch to show that the counsellor cares. Busari (2011) affirms that a good counsellor should be able to use his eyes and ears in understanding his client. He should be able to pick all non-verbal cues because they are important in counselling.

Non-verbal communication from the counsellor during counselling sessions assures client of the clarification of his feeling about the topic under consideration which is likely to be of greatest value to the client.

While giving the importance of non-verbal communication, Sanusi & Dare (2003), stated that, since non-verbal cues are frequently what people perceive first when they interact with others, they

are important. According to them, this importance ranges from; establishing authenticity, enhancing emotional connection, understanding unspoken messages, building empathy, facilitating active listening, building positive impressions, conflict resolution, consistency and trustworthiness.

Professional counsellors should understand that not all clients and not in all situations will clients open up or communicate in words, especially in encounters with clients that are introverted, highly secretive or sensitive cases. In situations such as these, the counsellor's deeper knowledge of non-verbal cues will help him wither any storms.

Cultural Sensitivity: The concept of cultural sensitivity in counselling demands that the professional counsellor takes into consideration, respect and recognizes the client's cultural background, beliefs and practices. Being culturally sensitive, the counsellor must be aware that there are cultural differences and such differences can affect the way a client expresses himself and that culture can influence the way a client perceives the counselling process.

According to Chung & Bemak (2020) cultural sensitivity in counselling is much more than recognition of the existing diversity. It entails the critical understanding about how culture influences an individual's perception, emotional experience and resilience. Ratts (2021) points that, failure to adopt cultural competence means that the counsellors may misjudge behaviours that are rooted in culture, hence, poor diagnosis, diminished client relationship and overall worse outcome.

However, Sue (2019) indicated that in response to the challenge of cultural sensitivity, there has been increasing focus on multicultural counselling competencies as skills that professional counsellors should have to deal with cultural diverse clientele. According to Sue et. al. (2024) multicultural counselling focuses on three elements: cultural self-efficacy, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills. The cultural skills requires the counsellor's understanding of own cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes, extent of multicultural experience, and abilities to use multicultural interventions. Hook (2020) submitted that counsellor's competencies in multicultural counselling makes him act concordantly with the culture of the client; thus increasing the effectiveness of the therapy and the satisfaction of the client.

To boost client's interest in counselling, it is therefore important for professional counsellors to take into consideration cultural diversities as it is a crucial element in the counselling practice.

Goal Setting: Goal setting is another fundamental strategy employ by professional counsellors. Goal setting as a strategy requires the professional counsellors working with his client to establish clear, achievable goals to guide their counselling relationships. When counsellors set expectations with clients at the beginning of the therapeutic journey, it gives the client the hope that the journey been embarked upon will be fruitful. It then behooves the professional counsellor not to let his client down.

In setting goal, professional counsellor must make effort towards making his goal achieving a SMART objective. This means that, the set goal must be, specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

According to Cooper and Law (2018), goals may help focus and direct client' and therapists' attention in the therapeutic work. This may be of particular importance in short-term work and in times of austerity, in which clients and therapists need to provide the most effective interventions with the least use of resources. Cooper & Norcross (2015) strongly argued for using goals in therapy. According to them, this is what many clients want as research suggests that around two out of ten laypeople want specific goals be set in the therapy, with around two out of ten not wanting this.

Sheldon & Elliot (1999) stated that, there is evidence that goal attainment results in enhanced well-being because it promotes need-satisfying experiences related to feeling autonomous. According to Kleinke (1994), through goal setting, the counsellor encourages clients to face their anxieties; helps clients enhance their sense of mastery and self-efficacy, overcome demoralization, gain hope, achieve insights; and teaches clients to accept their realities.

Conclusion

Boosting client engagement is very crucial for any successful counselling encounter with clients. In today's world, professional counsellors should try to acquit themselves with all necessary strategies that can foster smooth relationship with their clients. This paper has pointed out some of those strategies with which professional counsellors can devise to foster a robust engagement with their clients.

When counsellors acquaint themselves with these practices thorough mastery of professional strategies, it will engender trust from their clients. This will further boost smooth cordial relationship between them and their clients.

Recommendations

In order to further encourage clients to patronize the counselling services, professional counsellors should:

1. Acquaint themselves with all the necessary strategies required to handle clients' cases at different situations.
2. Abide by all the professional ethics and guide against anything than can jeopardize the dignity of the profession.
3. The Counselling professional body, CASSON as is the case of Nigeria should organize periodic seminars for members to remind them on what is expected of their relationship with clients.

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