

Empathic Listening versus Cognitive Processing

Empathic Listening:

The overall objective of the counselor is to communicate with a client in such a way that the client feels understood and experiences a sense of empathy.

This is achieved through establishing a co-regulating experience, using mirroring of body language and voice to synchronize nervous systems.

Often times, the counselor then leads the client toward a lower and slower presentation.

The counselor focuses on getting the client to describe their feelings as a symptom. “How often do you feel this way? How strong is this feeling? How do you experience this feeling in your body? How does this feeling affect your thinking?” How does this feeling affect your behaviors.” Note: These are not why questions. Why questions, such as “why do you feel like that?” should be reserved for a therapy session – especially with kids who have a significant trauma history. Those sorts of questions tend to make kids more unstable, not more centered, and thus are best done in the context of a contained therapy session, not as part of residential time.

Done well, the client will become more emotionally centered through feeling like the counselor truly understands what they emotionally experience. Avoid slipping into problem-solving as that moves the client from the emotional-processing parts of their brain (their inner Artist) to the cognitive-processing parts of their brain (their inner Scout).

Once a sense of co-regulation and empathy has been achieved, and the client has been supported by the counselor in simply quietly accepting their feelings it's usually time to plug the client back into regular programming. Now the idea is to put those feelings away (perhaps save them for their next therapy session) and focus on the residential structures of the moment.

Empathic Listening is great for developing the executive skill of Stress Tolerance. It also improves clients' abilities to co-regulate with staff which leads to kids becoming calmer and more centered whenever they're around that staff person.

Cognitive Processing:

The overall objective of the counselor is to help the client take personal responsibility for their own behaviors, social responsibility for how their behaviors impact others, and responsibility for changing their behaviors.

This is largely an intellectual exercise, and to some extent feelings are not a focus because emotions make it harder for kids to talk and access their best thinking abilities. So the most basic step in Cognitive Processing to get the client to own their own problem behaviors, to simply be able to admit to what behaviors they did that resulted in them having to process with a staff person. Cognitive Processing is frequently a great intervention when a client has been separated from the group and is now calm enough to think and speak coherently.

A connection is made between feelings and behaviors that were driven by those feelings, but again from an intellectual perspective. Cognitive Processing is not trying to resolve whatever

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feelings were involved in an incident – rather to help the client understand that how they handle their feelings impacts their life and people around them.

Once the client has owned their own behaviors, and perhaps the feelings that were associated with those behaviors, then the counselor moves on to social responsibility – how did their behaviors impact other people? It's natural for kids to bring up how they think they made others feel, but dwelling on that feelings level tends to degrade the client's abilities to cognitively process. So, the focus is less on whatever feelings those behaviors might have triggered and more on how other's activities were disrupted.

The next step is to help the client identify what they could do differently next time. Again, the focus is on behaviors, not on the client having different feelings.

Cognitive Processing then lends itself well to two additional steps that can enhance social responsibility – especially accountability to one's living group. Relationship Repair and Restitution are behaviors that express to the living group (peers and staff) the personal and social responsibility their taking.

Relationship Repair is typically saying you're sorry to someone, perhaps writing an apology card, or doing some activity with another person.

Restitution is a symbolic action acknowledging that your behaviors made it more unpleasant for kids to live here and/or for staff to work here. Thus, restitution involves doing something that makes it more pleasant for others to live and work here. Restitution activities should, typically, take only 5 to 15 minutes to complete. These are largely symbolic and kids should be set up for success. Both Relationship Repair and Restitution help kids to feel a sense of closure to an incident.

A Group Explanation is the other structure that comes out of Cognitive Processing. In a Group Explanation a small group of kids (who've been coached ahead of time) and ideally some staff who were involved in an incident listen to the client present their processing. Their role is to give some feedback on the accuracy of how the client thinks they impacted other people, and potentially to give constructive advice.

Typically, programs that use Relationship Repair / Restitution and Group Explanations incentivize completing these tasks by requiring them to be done before some loss of privileges (triggered by the problem-behavior incident) can be restored. This gives clients greater control over how long such restrictions are in place, again enhancing personal and social responsibility.