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Attending and listening

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The foundation of most training programs for mental health practitioners is the process of becoming a good listener. All approaches to counseling emphasize the critical importance of listening and attending to the client. These skills are not easy to develop. Many graduate counseling training programs devote two years or more to the development of basic counseling skills. Yet listening and attending skills are infrequently discussed in sport psychology. Research in our field almost never focuses directly on the basic skill of listening, although advanced skills such as goal-setting and imagery-training have been studied extensively. Despite the limited attention in the literature on becoming a good listener, experts in sport psychology attest to the high degree of importance they attach to this process. As Orlick (1989) stated:

First I start with the athletes’ needs ... I really listen to athletes. I listen intently. I focus totally on what they are saying and really draw from their experiences. I encourage them to reflect upon and continue to discover what works best for them in different circumstances.

(p. 362)

The core of this chapter is the presentation and discussion of the microskills approach to counseling, originally developed at Colorado State University in the late 1960s (Ivey, Normington, Miller, Morrill, & Haase, 1968). As elaborated over the years, especially by Allen Ivey (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010), the microskills model identifies a hierarchy of skills, beginning with basic building blocks such as ethics, competence and wellness, and culminating in the ability to integrate skills from theories of psychology into a personal counseling style. In this chapter, we focus on the basic skills of attending the nonverbal and body language attributes that signal a readiness to listen, and listening, which can be further broken down into such basic skills as questioning, paraphrasing, and reflecting. This approach has been influential in the training of counselors, psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, and others in the helping professions (Egan, 2007a). These microskills are critical to effective sport psychology consulting.

Terms such as counseling and therapy will be used throughout this chapter with particular meanings. Counseling is the work of helping people cope with everyday problems
and opportunities. It is a fundamental part of most applied work in psychology, including applied sport psychology. Because it usually occurs within the context of a helper (the sport psychologist) and a client (the athlete), it depends on a process of interaction between two people. Interviewing is the basic process of information gathering and information sharing between people. Conversations between the practitioner and client in counseling are part of a helping dialogue. Egan (2007a) suggested that an effective dialogue comprises turn-taking, connecting, mutual influencing, and co-creating outcomes. Therapy, or psychotherapy, is an intense process focused on helping clients deal with persistent and distressing life problems, such as anxiety or eating disorders. Throughout this chapter, the terms counselor, sport psychology consultant, and sport psychologist will be used interchangeably to refer to the person conducting applied sport psychology work, and client will refer to the athlete in a counseling relationship.

The building blocks of helpful listening

Your skill as a counselor depends upon how comfortable you can make your clients feel in your relationship with them, so that they feel safe discussing the issues that concern them. Even if athletes come to you to ask for help, they may be reluctant to talk about emotional and upsetting issues. Any problems with sport performance can be distressing for clients because self-confidence and self-image may be directly derived from past performances. What are the building blocks of helpful listening? How does the initial counseling interview begin?

Initiation of counseling

There are generally two types of initiations of counseling: nontraditional or traditional. In a traditional model, an athlete approaches a counselor directly to talk about some important issues that have been of concern. The sport psychologist has usually prepared for the interview, and may have some knowledge of the presenting issues. Although typical of many professional counseling situations, this mode of interaction may be less frequent in sport psychology services than in other counseling or consulting practices. Common in sport psychology practice is a nontraditional model, in which athletes may seem to have nonprofessional or casual relationships with sport psychology consultants, but at some point begin to talk about their private concerns or challenges. It is sometimes possible to steer a nontraditional beginning toward an effective counseling relationship, but to do so requires tact and empathy from the counselor. In either model of initiation, it is important to have a quiet and relatively private setting to discuss the athlete’s concerns.

Attending behavior

The initial moments of the first interview are spent listening to the athlete about their concerns. Remember, these problems developed over time; resist the tendency of many novice counselors to try to solve the issue immediately. The first part of the session should be about developing rapport and connection with the client. As Carl Rogers first emphasized, a critical quality of a genuine relationship is immersing oneself in the immediacy of the moment, which means paying full attention to the client (Rogers, 1961). Attending behavior has the critical aspects of: eye contact, positive vocal qualities and questions, verbal tracking, and attentive body language (Ivey et al., 2010). In predominant Western
cultures, body language that suggests full attention includes facing the client squarely, leaning slightly forward, expressing appropriate emotions via facial expressions, and using encouraging gestures. Attending involves focusing on the athlete and what they may be saying or feeling, and not getting caught up in problem solving. It is a time to listen and attend to verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Attending behavior should also convey respect for the client and an appreciation of any differences between counselor and client. Sport psychologists should listen carefully to all their clients have to say, and make no assumptions about them. All listeners bring their own listening filters to the helping relationship, and these filters are influenced by one's gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, and so on. Being aware of one's own filters is essential for successful listening, but so is learning that athletes are not defined by labels but must be respected for their individuality.

Questions

Having athletes tell their stories is important for developing interventions and building positive relationships. In the early stages of interviews, a few well-placed and focused questions will show that consultants are listening and understanding the importance of the stories the athletes are telling. Avoid getting sidetracked with unimportant elements; counselors can ask some of these questions later on in the interviews. Consultants should look at the athletes, not at their computers or notepads. Although taking some notes is important (for professional reasons of best practice, as well as for aiding memory; see Chapter 6), remember that the first few minutes tend to be important in developing a connection through nonverbal behavior.

Four microskills that are central to the initial interviews are paraphrasing, reflection of feelings, reflection of meaning, and summarizing. These verbal skills show athletes that counselors are listening to their stories and are concerned about their well-being. They are the foundation of effective listening.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is restating the essential content of what the athlete has said, using other words. The paraphrase needs to preserve the meaning of the story but indicate that the consultant has been able to identify the main sources of concern. When paraphrasing the information, make sure to exhibit encouraging nonverbal communication such as positive facial expressions and looks of concern. Nothing is more off-putting to a client than when a consultant’s nonverbal expressions do not match verbal expressions. You may have noticed this issue while viewing the television news, such as a commentator talking about a serious accident while smiling.

Reflecting feelings

The second basic listening skill is the reflection of the athlete’s feelings. A reflection of feeling occurs when, while paraphrasing a statement, the sport psychologist includes an explicit identification of the athlete’s feelings (Egan, 2007b). Observe clients’ verbal and nonverbal communications and, while listening to their words, try to feel what they are feeling. Reflection can be a questioning way to “check out” what they are really feeling. Use an empathic tone with positive facial expression. It is not helpful to say things such as, “Don’t be upset,”
"You should not worry about that," or "It will be OK." Such comments can appear to your clients that you are making light of their experiences. If you make an inaccurate reflection, say something such as, "It seems I have not quite grasped what is going on for you," and then ask clients to explain more about how they feel so that you can better understand them.

**Reflecting meaning**

The third basic listening skill is reflection of meaning. Reflection of meaning occurs when sport psychology consultants paraphrase the stories their clients may be trying to tell them. Consultants fill in the blanks of the stories, while asking the athletes to elaborate and clarify. Reflection of meaning should be tentative. If consultants are wrong, this mistake gives athletes the opportunity to "set the record straight," which will assist them in understanding their own experiences. This approach also helps athletes see that the sport psychologist is following the story and the experience.

**Summarizing**

The fourth basic skill of a good listener, summarizing, helps with both attending and the next stage, which is setting goals and developing an intervention. These topics are covered in later chapters (e.g., Chapter 51). In summarizing, sport psychologists paraphrase both the information and the emotional content the clients shared, restating them as accurately as possible. Summarizing takes longer than simple paraphrasing and moves the counseling forward toward action. It usually happens toward the end of an interview. Summarizing helps to provide clarity, especially with complex issues (Ivey et al., 2010).

An advantage of many sport psychology approaches to counseling is that they build upon the strengths of athletes, drawing out the athletes’ personal strengths and resources and reflecting them back, helping to create an atmosphere of optimism and providing focus and direction to the interview. The next section summarizes how various theoretical orientations can guide the listening process.

**Theory-guided listening: focusing attention**

As much as any applied area of psychology, sport psychology is strongly identified with the set of specific interventions its practitioners commonly use. These various interventions, usually identified as a group under the rubric “psychological skills training,” or PST (Vealey, 1988), have been described as the “canon” of sport psychology (Andersen, 2009) and include approaches such as goal-setting, relaxation training, concentration training, imagery work, self-talk, and emotional control. Yet the application of these interventions does not occur in a vacuum, and the basic work between sport psychologist and athlete happens within a counseling relationship. The counselor/therapist (sport psychologist) listens to and talks to the client (athlete) and together they establish the goals for their work together. Even if PST is used, its introduction and implementation will be strongly influenced by the approach of the sport psychologist to this counseling relationship.

Theoretical approaches to counseling and behavior change are foundational in sport psychology consulting and good consultants are guided by their theoretical frameworks at every step of the process. One of the markers of a suboptimal sport psychology consulting
relationship is the lack of a theoretical orientation to guide the interactions. Researchers who asked athletes to describe the characteristics of effective and ineffective sport psychology consultants found that the atheoretical application of PST programs, what they described as a “canned” approach to consulting, was one of the main markers of consultants who were perceived as ineffective (Gould, Tammen, Murphy, & May, 1991; Orlick & Partington, 1987). A theoretical orientation provides direction for the consultant by highlighting certain issues, concepts, and situations that deserve attention. The consultant will be listening for these key concepts and will attend to them when they occur. The theoretical orientation of the consultant also provides an explanation for what is happening in the relationship with the athlete. It predicts that certain interventions will be effective in certain situations and helps guide the consultant in choosing strategies.

In Section III of this book, a variety of theoretical models within sport psychology are discussed, including cognitive-behavioral, humanistic, psychodynamic, and family systems approaches. Here, we will briefly highlight how three such theoretical approaches influence the work of attending and listening within the sport psychologist–athlete counseling relationship. It is not feasible to discuss the many theoretical approaches, so we have focused on those that appear to be the ones that sport psychologists commonly employ. For each, we highlight some of the critical issues, concepts, and situations to which the consultant will be attending.

**Behavioral theory**

In one sense, the behavioral theories of B. F. Skinner (1971) could be said to underlie all attempts to influence the dialogue between counselor and client. We have emphasized that the counseling relationship is one of shared work, a collaboration between sport psychologist and athlete, but because the relationship begins with the athlete seeking help and the sport psychologist as the expert providing assistance, whatever the sport psychologist chooses to attend will have a great influence on the direction of subsequent discourse. Behaviorists consider the mere act of attention to be a powerful reinforcer, something that is readily apparent in social situations. For example, consider the following hypothetical conversation between a sport psychologist and an athlete:

**Athlete:** I'm still upset about the last match I suppose, and I'm not looking forward to the tournament this weekend. I haven't been sleeping well this week; I keep thinking about how the last match ended. I think I wanted coach to get upset and yell at me; maybe I need that. I'm worried this is going to be a pattern, a habit or something. My parents have noticed, they're bugging me to talk to you about it.

**Sport Psychologist:** I'm hearing that you're still upset about last week and you're worried about this weekend. Tell me about what happened with your coach.

Even the briefest consulting situations give rise to a host of information, and one of the main responsibilities of the sport psychologist is to help focus the dialogue in a manner that moves the process forward. In this interaction, the sport psychologist uses the microskill of paraphrasing to establish empathy, and this tactic reinforces the athlete for disclosing feelings. By attending to the coaching relationship, the sport psychologist subtly reinforces the discussion of this issue. Several other issues such as the athlete’s negative self-talk, the inability to let go of a defeat, and the relationship with parents are also worthy of attention. The act of attending directs the discussion toward some topics at the expense of others.
A skilled counselor will keep track of the issues raised and may wish to come back to them at a later point in the interview.

In a related fashion, issues or concerns raised by the athlete that the sport psychology consultant chooses to ignore are likely to be mentioned less, due to lack of reinforcement. The process of not reinforcing a behavior with the goal of eliminating it or greatly decreasing its frequency is known as extinction. The practice of extinguishing an athlete’s verbal focus on an issue is usually used with respect to thoughts and feelings such as anxiety and depression that may interfere with performance.

The behavioral framework is a natural fit for a sport psychologist due to the strong focus on behavior change in both approaches. Behavioral theory suggests that sport psychology consultants pay special attention to the environmental and social factors that shape and maintain athlete behaviors (contingencies of reinforcement), especially those that athletes wish to change.

**Cognitive theory**

As formulated by theorists such as Beck (1976) and Ellis (1973), cognitive theories propose that behavior change occurs when cognitions change, reversing the half-century trend of minimizing the importance of cognitions, initiated by the behavioral movement of Watson (1913) and Skinner (1971). Sport psychology consultants using a cognitive therapy approach listen carefully to the thoughts and emotions expressed by the athletes-clients, paying special attention to cognitions that seem to trigger strong feelings and seeking to identify irrational thoughts that lead to ineffective learning, maladaptive emotions, and poor performance.

One of the challenges for the counselor in identifying negative thinking is that some cognitions are believed to be automatic (Beck, 1976); that is, they occur frequently, have strong emotional connotations (e.g., “I can’t beat this guy,” “my coach is disappointed in me”), but the client is initially unaware of the thoughts because they are routine. Not only must the sport psychologist use expert listening skills, but athletes must also learn to recognize, or listen to, their own self-talk, with the goal of identifying ineffective cognitions and changing them.

Many psychologists and sport psychologists today identify themselves as cognitive-behavioral therapists (Mahoney & Meyers, 1989), merging the cognitive and behavioral approaches into a system that emphasizes client behavior change via both reinforcement strategies and the facilitation of changes in thoughts and feelings. This model is a good fit for sport psychology consultants because it places a strong responsibility on the client–athlete to make behavioral changes and to be accountable for practicing new behaviors and implementing agreed-upon goals. The counseling relationship becomes an alliance between sport psychologist and athlete to identify goals and initiate desired changes. In this approach, listening and attending skills are crucial for the successful creation of a working partnership.

**The transtheoretical stages of change model**

Prochaska and colleagues developed the transtheoretical model of change in an attempt to clearly explain the change process as it occurs within most therapeutic relationships, irrespective of theoretical orientation (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994). Identification of the stages of change themselves was an important contribution to the helping literature, but the critical insight provided by the transtheoretical model is that clients’ behaviors and willingness to change will reflect the stages they are in – pre-contemplation,
contemplation, preparation, action, or maintenance. This model is relevant for applied sport psychology, because athlete clients are often spread widely across the stages of change spectrum. Some are ready to begin behavioral change (i.e., they are in the preparation stage), but many have only vaguely thought about applying a mental skills approach to their sport, perhaps through conversations with a teammate or because a sport psychologist has been assigned to their team, program, or school. The challenge for sport psychology consultants is to help the athletes move forward in the change process. Two critical listening tasks face sport psychologists in the early stages of helping relationships. First, consultants must identify the stage of change occupied by the athletes. Straightforward questions about how serious athletes are about changing specific behaviors and what their change plans are will usually enable determinations to be made. Second, to assist athletes in moving toward desired changes, listening to their rationales for change is essential. Helping athletes identify pros and cons of change is the most effective way of helping them move toward the next stage.

**Skill development for sport psychologists in attending and listening**

Listening and attending are skills to be learned and practiced. Becoming an effective listener is a lifelong process. Here are some general suggestions to develop the skills outlined in this chapter:

1. **Become aware of your own verbal and nonverbal communication style.** It is important to have accurate awareness of your own tendencies. To gain such awareness, you can obtain feedback from colleagues and other professionals. With modern technologies, it is possible to record a sample session from your own practice (with the client’s permission) and subsequently review what you said and how you said it, examining both verbal and nonverbal interactions. Analyze your own listening and attending microskills. Another way to engage in critical self-reflection is to practise interviewing with a colleague or a friend and ask for specific feedback. A great resource is found in Ivey et al. (2010). Their format, analyzing a counseling interview in a systematic and objective fashion, may help you to develop these important skills.

2. **Obtain continuing education training** not only at sport psychology seminars but through a variety of professional development activities and workshops that may introduce you to different orientations and approaches. Choose seminars that will challenge your counseling attitudes and add to your repertoire of skills.

3. **Find a mentor, supervisor, or other individual who can be relatively objective about your work.** When starting your journey as a counselor, it is important to obtain consistent feedback on your skills. But even the most experienced counselors benefit from the opportunities to discuss situations that are complex and challenging. Sport psychology consulting is rarely as simple and straightforward as it might seem from the reading of an introductory sport psychology textbook.

**Conclusion**

Sport psychology has a strong research tradition of examining a variety of psychological strategies that are commonly employed to change performance (Hays, 2009). The psychological
skills training approach of sport psychologists must rest on a firm foundation of excellent communication skills, of which listening and attending are the most basic (Ivey et al., 2010). This chapter described the microskills approach to developing good communication skills and suggested ways to strengthen and improve these skills in sport psychology consulting. Good communication skills are a necessary foundation for effective counseling, but these skills are just the first step in becoming an effective sport psychology consultant. “Communication skills are essential for building the helping partnership and for helping clients move through the stages and steps of the helping model. But they are the essential tools for making the model work and not the model itself” (Egan, 2007b, p. 45). See Box 2.1 for a summary of the key points made in this chapter.

**Box 2.1**

*Summary of key points about attending and listening*

- Expert sport psychologists place a high priority on excellent listening as an essential foundation for effective applied sport psychology consultations.
- Sport psychology consulting often involves a nontraditional counseling approach, with athletes often having an informal relationship with a sport psychology consultant that can suddenly develop into a serious counseling relationship.
- The *microskills* approach suggests that specific behaviors form the foundation of effective communication in all counseling relationships.
- Attending behavior includes the critical aspects of: eye contact, positive vocal qualities, questions, verbal tracking, and attentive body language.
- Listening skills include: paraphrasing, reflection of feelings, reflection of meaning, and summarizing.
- Consultants using a *behavioral* model will be listening for stories that reveal the contingencies of reinforcement and punishment in the athlete’s life.
- Consultants using a *cognitive therapy* approach will listen to the thoughts and emotions expressed by athletes, seeking to identify irrational thoughts that lead to poor performance.
- Consultants guided by the *transtheoretical model* will listen to identify the stages of change occupied by athletes, and will help athletes identify the pros and cons of change.
- Analyze your own listening and attending microskills, using recordings of actual client sessions if possible, or conducting practice interviews with colleagues.
- Obtain continuing education training at sport psychology seminars and at applied workshops offered by therapists, counselors, and other experts.
- Develop a mentee or supervised relationship with a skilled sport psychologist who can provide you with feedback and guide your development as an expert listener.

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