Along with understanding the facts and myths of sexual assault, the theoretical framework of counseling, and the goal of empowerment, rape crisis counselors need to hone practical skills for working with survivors. Learning specific counseling skills is important, but there is nothing mysterious about them. Indeed, almost everyone possesses the capacity to become an effective counselor.

Response Tools to Use in Counseling

In general, response tools are ways in which the counselor lets the survivor know that she or he is being heard and attended to. Most people discover that they already use some of these skills in their everyday interactions, although they may not know them as “response tools.”

Counselors are encouraged to learn these skills and practice ways to incorporate them into counseling sessions. Role-playing offers creative means to master these new techniques and to get important feedback. Role-plays may feel awkward at first, but they can help counselors develop a “style” and comfort level with survivors. Counselors in training should not be afraid to take risks during role-plays and should try to personalize and refine their newly acquired skills.

In addition to serving as a learning mechanism, role-playing can be helpful in counseling sessions. For example, you could take the role of a significant other, and have the survivor work on communicating her feelings about the assault and her recovery. Such role-plays can build self-confidence and allow the survivor to release feelings in a safe setting.

The basic response tools used by counselors are:

- Active Listening

Careful, attentive listening is crucial to counseling. Even when stories or descriptions seem similar to those heard before, a counselor must be alert to the fact that this is a new survivor with a unique story. Assumptions should not be made based on other clients. Probably the most important communication skill is listening. It sounds easy, but effective listening
involves hearing and feeling the way things are being said – not just the words but also the tone and the expression. Listening allows the client to feel okay about sharing and provides a place for the survivor to arrive at her own course of action.¹

- **Hearing Everything**

A counselor must be attentive to what is being said – and what is being left unsaid. The context in which the words are spoken includes body language and eye contact (or lack thereof); however, as discussed later in this chapter, be sure to consider possible cultural differences before assuming what the particular body language means. If the counselor is not sure about what she has heard, or if there is more than one way to interpret what has been said, the counselor should rephrase the statement and allow the survivor to affirm, correct, or modify it.²

- **Clarifying**

There are numerous types of questions serving different functions. Clarifying questions – such as, “Is there anything else you want to tell me?” – help the counselor better understand the survivor’s situation, her needs, and how to help her decide an appropriate course of action. The purpose of this questioning should never be solely to learn the details of an assault; in fact, effective counseling can occur without the counselor knowing any details. Rely on the survivor to share what level of detail is needed to disclose in order for healing to take place.

- **Open-Ended Questions**

Open-ended questions allow the survivor to respond freely with feelings or thoughts – whereas closed-ended questions tend to anticipate answers and reflect the bias of the questioner. Examples of open-ended questions are: “What were some of your thoughts when . . . ?” and “Can you tell me how you’re feeling about it?” A closed-ended question typically can elicit a simple yes or no response; an example is, “You were really scared when . . . , weren’t you?” Counselors usually prefer open-ended questions to closed-ended ones, because they allow for greater possibilities in responding by the survivor.

- **Silence**

Sometimes silence can feel uncomfortable, yet it can be an important way for a survivor to think about something that was said or to gather thoughts. A counselor should learn to gauge when silence is needed in order to give enough time for reflection – and when silence stops serving that purpose.
• **Encouragers**

Simple statements or phrases can be used by the counselor to let the survivor know that she is being heard and validated. Examples of verbal encouragement include “Please, go on,” and “I’m with you.”

• **Reflecting**

A reflection is like a verbal mirror held up to the survivor. Simply repeat the last word or phrase. This serves the function of an encourager, while still leaving responsibility for setting the direction on the survivor.\(^3\)

• **Summarizing/Paraphrasing**

To ensure you are understanding the survivor, and that she has a chance to hear what has been said, it is worthwhile to restate what you heard her say in a brief fashion. In paraphrasing, try to capture the most important points of the survivor’s conversation, and always leave room to be corrected (with questions such as, “Is that right?” or “Have I got it?”). Summarizing should not go on so long that it will interfere with the client’s flow of thought. Paraphrasing a sentence or two can be helpful if inserted into a long pause.\(^4\)

• **Feedback**

By giving feedback, a counselor adds an interpretation or pulls together a sense of what is happening with the client. In giving feedback, there needs to be sensitivity to the survivor, and forethought about how the comment will be accepted. Feedback can describe things observed from tone of voice, or body language. For example, a survivor who says, “Everything is fine,” while crossing her arms and looking down at the floor may be giving another message. The counselor might respond with: “I hear you saying that everything is fine, but your body language seems to indicate that there is something else going on with you. Am I right?”

• **Active Listening Response**

A response based on active listening reflects the feeling behind the statement by the client. For example, for a survivor who said, “I hate him so much I could kill him,” an active listening response might be, “It sounds to me like you’re really angry.” Active listening response is an effective way to break down barriers, since it allows for exploration of emotions behind statements.

• **Reframing**

Reframing happens when a client understands a situation in a new light with a new awareness. A counselor can help with this educational process. For example, if the survivor feels she did something to deserve the abuse or that it was her fault, the counselor can
reframe this idea and refocus the facts – so the survivor understands what her true motives were or that she did not have the resources to prevent the abuse.

- **Normalized**

A counselor can provide valuable information to a survivor by describing and affirming the many frequently experienced reactions to sexual assault. This can assure the survivor that she is not alone and that there is nothing “wrong” or abnormal with her. Many survivors feel that they are the only one in the world who feels a certain way. By normalizing the reactions, a counselor can help the survivor realize that her feelings are not unusual, and that she is able to work through the pain and trauma.

**Cross-Cultural Considerations**

Some response tools will be more or less effective based on the survivor’s cultural, racial, ethnic, and economic background. Mechanisms and approaches that work for clients from one culture may not be appropriate for survivors of another culture. (See *Chapter 5: Working Cross-Culturally.*) One of the major differences is related to body language, which is used more as a way of communicating in some cultures than others. Different ethnic groups tend to use levels of talking or hand movements as ways to communicate. Eye contact is another form of body language that can mean different things for people of different cultures. For example, in some Asian and Latin cultures, direct eye contact is viewed as a sign of disrespect, especially between children and adults. A counselor who misunderstands this tradition could change the nature of the relationship in a way that may not be helpful.

Counselors should become aware of the major cultural groups in their service area and learn of possible variations in body language and ways of expressing feelings. By making personal contacts, attending training sessions, and doing outreach, counselors can develop this sensitivity. Be careful not to stereotype based on this awareness, but learn ways that communication may be different. It is appropriate to ask questions and to open a discussion with survivors about the ways that communication is most effective for them.

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3 Volunteer training materials, Rape Crisis Center of Central Massachusetts (Worcester, 1990).