

Talking therapies

Social worker and *Tackling drugs, changing lives* award nominee

Tony Wright describes a highly unusual – but very successful – way of improving communication skills for both clients and professionals

HAVING BEEN A SOCIAL WORKER FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS, virtually all of it at the 'sharp end' with the most disadvantaged, socially isolated and marginalised people in our society, I have come to the conclusion that it doesn't matter what the presenting problem is, or what negative labels someone has acquired on the way – the only way to positively influence behaviour is to ensure that the professional relationship is based on respect. It must be non-judgmental, with boundaries regarding expected behaviour and interactions both verbal and non-verbal, set and adhered to.

It's essential that practitioners develop and improve their communication skills, paying particular attention to appropriate body language, active listening skills, empathetic responses and the building of rapport in a short time and often-artificial environments. Plain talking and the avoidance of 'mixed messages', along with honesty, truth and integrity – no matter how unpalatable and uncomfortable at the time – are the essential skills.

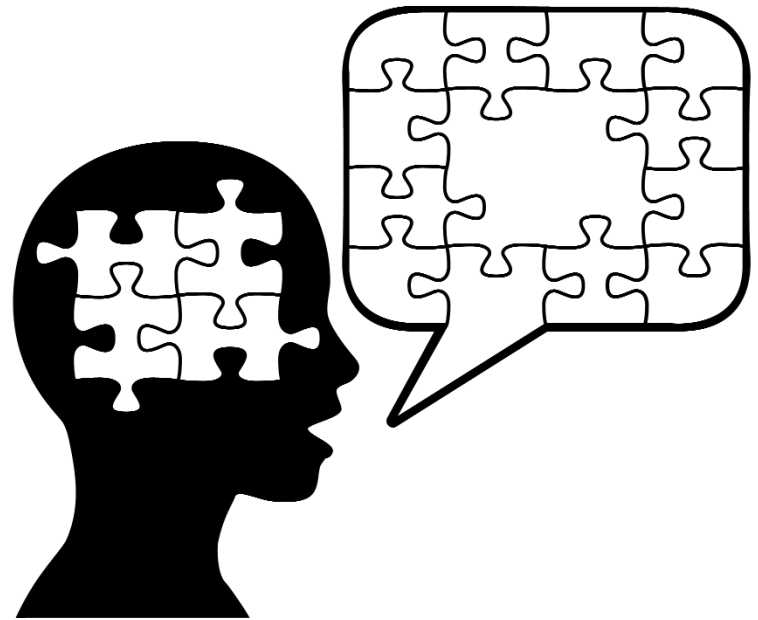
Yet how often do we see professionals avoiding dealing with difficult situations or decisions? Situations then spiral out of control, and ultimately the client is blamed – labelled difficult, manipulative, uncooperative or potentially dangerous. I can think of only one occasion in 25 years when a client was given a full and unreserved apology.

It's usually in the heat of battle that such subjective assessments are made, invariably when the client feels let down or when they have been misled. It's a fact that many people have a limited emotional vocabulary and struggle to deal objectively with disappointment or a sense of injustice, and emotive issues often manifest themselves in angry verbal interactions. It's at this point when the power imbalance makes itself apparent, with negative representations of the client recorded in their file. I've often read a case file and expected to be confronted with an axe-carrying psychopath, not the diminutive, inarticulate, world-weary client before me. Sadly this can influence interaction for decades.

So how do we get back to good old-fashioned straight talking and open communication? The key may be the use of debate as a vehicle to teach and improve communication skills for both professionals and clients.

Last year I approached Dr Peter Warburton, director of sport at Durham University – someone with whom we'd collaborated to allow access to sporting facilities for problematic drug users – to ask if he would approach the Durham Union Society, one of the oldest student debating societies in the world, to see if they would consider teaching debating skills to me and my staff and, more importantly, clients with experience of alcohol or drug dependency, the criminal justice system, homelessness or at risk of sexual exploitation. The then-president agreed and during eight weekly sessions we were taught the basics of British Parliamentary Debate. It was immediately apparent that the staff team was on a steep learning curve and the real latent talent lay with the volunteer participants.

We learned how to project our voices so we could modulate them, not only in volume but emotional content, as well as how to present our views logically and in



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front of a group. We were also taught the importance of listening intently to what others had to say, practicing deconstructing the opposing team's argument through logical, critical analysis and learning how to be verbally spontaneous but also how to structure an argument. The learning environment broke down barriers between staff and clients and it became a level playing field – I and several of my colleagues felt very self-conscious, as if it was expected that we would automatically excel in this role. It soon became very clear we did not.

Boundaries and expectations were set and established – common courtesy became the norm and it was clear that the more the group understood the social protocols involved in debating, the more the environment felt psychologically safe, allowing people to operate outside their comfort zone, give freedom to self-expression and trust in others while growing in confidence emotionally and spiritually.

The atmosphere at the final event was electric, probably more in anticipation that it would be an unmitigated disaster and we would be picking up the remains of shattered egos for months to come. However it exceeded all expectations and was triumph for all involved – it has since become an annual event in the Durham Union Society fixture list, enabling others from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their life skills and ability to communicate.

The use of debate training to improve communication skills, and indeed citizenship, could be rolled out to a host of different communities – young people, families, marginalised groups and anyone involved in the criminal justice system, including serving prisoners. I would argue that it should be used as part of a bigger project to educate communities about the democratic process and their role within it – groups that finish the training could link up with an MP from their constituency and visit the Houses of Parliament to see debate in action. This inclusive approach could promote active citizenship and go a long way towards strengthening our communities, as well as addressing the current apathy towards politics in general.

Tony Wright is a social worker.