

Communication workshop: A tool to improve relations

Taller de comunicación: Una herramienta para mejorar las relaciones

Oficina de Comunicação: Uma ferramenta para melhorar as relações

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents the foundation and methods used in a college workshop for seniors, including theory and communication techniques to improve relations. It was designed taking into account the background that indicates the real importance of interpersonal relationships in old age, a stage at which they become the major source of well-being. Because of this, enhancing the skills to engage with others is a priority task for promoting satisfaction and health in old age. In the meetings, we addressed the impossibility of non-communication, analog and digital communication, the punctuation of the sequence of events, assertiveness, the problem solving interpersonal problems and the perspective of complexity, among other issues. Filmic resources, cartoons and theoretical presentations were used among other resources. The topic is considered from a horizontal perspective in which the personal contributions of the participants are taken into account, enriching the theoretical reflection.

Keywords: Communication; Relationships; Workshop.

RESUMEN: Este trabajo presenta la fundamentación y modalidad empleada en un taller universitario para adultos mayores que contiene teoría y técnicas de comunicación para mejorar las relaciones. El mismo fue diseñado a partir de los antecedentes que señalan la importancia central que tienen las relaciones interpersonales en la vejez, etapa en la que se vuelven la mayor fuente de bienestar. Debido a esto, potenciar las habilidades para vincularse con otros es una tarea prioritaria de promoción de la satisfacción y la salud en la vejez. En los encuentros se aborda la imposibilidad de no comunicarse, la comunicación analógica y digital, la puntuación de la secuencia de los hechos, la asertividad, la resolución de problemas interpersonales y la perspectiva de la complejidad, entre otros temas. Se trabaja con recursos fílmicos, viñetas y presentaciones teóricas, entre otros recursos. El dispositivo está planteado desde una perspectiva horizontal en la que se favorecen los aportes personales de los participantes, los cuales permiten enriquecer la reflexión teórica.

Palabras Clave: Comunicación; Adultos mayores; Relaciones.

RESUMO: Este artigo apresenta as bases e os métodos utilizados em uma oficina da faculdade para os idosos, incluindo técnicas de teoria e da comunicação para melhorar as relações. Ela foi projetado tendo em conta o plano de fundo que indica a real importância das relações interpessoais na velhice, numa fase em que elas se tornam a principal fonte de bem-estar. Devido a isso, melhorar as competências para se envolver com os outros é uma tarefa prioritária para a promoção da satisfação e saúde na velhice. Nos encontros, abordamos a possibilidade de não-comunicação, analógica e comunicação digital, a pontuação da sequência de evento, a se comunicar, o problema de resolver problemas interpessoais e na perspectiva da complexidade, entre outros assuntos. Recursos cinematográficos, desenhos animados e apresentações teóricas foram utilizados entre outros recursos. O tema é considerado de uma perspectiva horizontal, em que as contribuições pessoais dos participantes são levadas em conta, enriquecendo a reflexão teórica.

Palavras-chave: Comunicação; Relacionamentos; Oficina.

Introduction

Communication is inherent to the human condition and social life. We all participate in the complex process of acquiring communication rules implicitly, i.e., without being aware of this learning. Through communication we can establish links with others, relationships in which we can live moments of happiness but also of great sadness (Arias, & Iacub, 2013).

In old age, the ability to communicate acquires great importance because the bonds become main sources of subjective well-being and happiness, positively associated with mental and physical health (Charles, & Carstensen, 2007; Zamarrón Cassinelle, 2006). On this basis, to recognize one's own and others' communication rules favors the ability to choose and decide how to communicate. The workshop presented in this article reflects an educational and thoughtful proposal for solving this task.

Theoretical proposal

The main focus in this proposal is the theory of human communication from a systemic perspective (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1997). This is seen as a construction of an interaction process, overcoming points of view unilaterally focused on the speaker or receiver. The context allows the understanding of the behavior's complexity:

If the research limits are expanded in order to include the effects of that behavior on others, the reactions of the latter and the context in which all this takes place, shifts the focus from the artificially isolated individual to the relationship between the parts of a larger system. The observer of human behavior, then goes from a deductive study of the mind to the study of observable manifestations of the relationship. The conductor of such events is communication (Op. cit., p. 23).

In turn, the authors, (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1997) suggest that communication can be subdivided into three areas: syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

The latter is the core of this work, because a pragmatic approach makes us aware about the rules on the ways we relate, rather than in the possible meanings or culturally patterned ways of organizing words. The pragmatic approach covers "the how" of communication, and opens the possibility of including non-verbal, situational and cultural aspects of the communication phenomenon. In addition, the pragmatic approach allows us to focus on the impact that communication has on individuals and on interactional systems. This theory has a constructivist epistemological basis; this implies that reality does not have an objective, knowable nature, beyond the existence of the subject who perceives it. Constructivism argues that reality is a product of the active perception of human beings, in which the data of reality, personal history and cultural characteristics of the environment merge into a whole. We leave aside the thought that puts forward a single knowable-in-itself reality, to consider the existence of multiple, divergent and equally valid realities, as seen from different points of view.

People learn to perceive certain patterns from the time they are born, as their minds are prepared for that (Neimeyer, Mahoney, & Aparicio, 1998). Within the family group, we learn to see the world through the process of primary socialization, which shapes what is called *common sense* (Berger, & Luckmann, 1979); that is, the construction of the natural way in which reality must be developed. This process consists of a group experience in which we learn to see certain specific patterns of a group as something universal. For example, in a home it is *natural* that a family watches television without speaking to each other while having dinner and then goes to bed at 10 p.m. Meanwhile, in another home it is equally *natural* that each member of the family goes to bed when he wishes to do it, after having dined together cheerfully discussing matters of each other's' life. The members of these families, who usually feel strange when being part of a pattern other than their own, tacitly accept each of these realities.

The workshop for seniors introduced in this paper takes the conceptual basis described in the preceding paragraphs and aims to have a positive impact in the quality of life of the participants through the strengthening of their communication resources.

The workshop

Based on these core ideas, we designed a workshop to work the following objectives as a group:

- to generate an environment for reflection and learning about the impact of communication in daily life;
- to foster the understanding of more flexible communication means;
- to promote encouraging and emotionally positive communication;
- to facilitate the process of personal development through effective communication;
- to favor greater understanding in intergenerational communication.

Working topics

From the start, the workshop emphasizes the flow of speech. As it is a communication workshop, the guiding idea is to facilitate communication in the group. To achieve this, the first meeting was devoted to the introduction of the participants and teachers. Activities that explain the motivations and expectations of the course are used.

Teachers encourage listening and understanding individual differences through various tools. One of these tools is the follow up question, which always aims to validate the experience in itself, while making visible the complexity of interpersonal situations where suffering and discomfort are generated.

In subsequent meetings, the theoretical contents are developed and individual and group exercises are promoted for both conceptual and experiential learning.

The topics are presented in order of increasing complexity, from the ontological and epistemological stance and the 'man theory model of human communication' (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1997), to the reflection of the affective bonds in the paradigm of complexity (Soto Gonzalez, 1999) taking uncertainty as an inherent component of social life. Respecting the individual differences becomes a basic attitude for interaction.

Below we provide a detailed list of contents:

- *Model of reality and man*

We start with a focus on the social aspects of man and the importance of building close relationships with others. Without denying the biological components of human behavior, the cultural and relational aspects are emphasized. Thus, the main postulates of the constructivist model are displayed and examples are presented in order to illustrate the many ways to interpret the same situation.

- *Coherence between emotion , thought and behavior*

We believe that mental health is based on the coherence between what is felt, is thought and is done. However, this interrelation should not be thought of as a given, but as a goal to which we aim to improve our quality of life. Behavior, emotion and beliefs are introduced as sources of self-knowledge from an integrated model, where all components make up as a whole and have the same weight in the communication process. We seek to perceive emotions and thoughts from a situational approach, which always makes sense in the situation in which they are generated; whether they are beneficial or undesirable for oneself or for the affective bond. This takes place mainly in the framework of personal acceptance, focusing on individual experience. These exercises are fundamental to build the basis of an empathic understanding of others.

- *Perception and interpretation*

Constructivists' principles are taken into account to work from the psychology of perception taking in the contributions of Gestalt Psychology (Swenson, 1987). A series of images that can be interpreted in different ways are shown, in order to work on the importance of being aware of the constructive character of every perception, as it is an interpretation of a stimulus. The importance of context - both present and historical- is also considered as a key factor to a better understanding of a definite conduct.

- *First and second order discourses*

Following the former idea, the concepts of perception of first and second order of Watzlawick (2000) are taken into account. First order perceptions refer to real objects and their attributes. Perceptions of the second order refer to the meanings that people attach to objects, but they do not constitute characteristics in themselves. A classic example would be the perception of a bottle containing some liquid; to an optimist, it will be a half-full bottle and for a pessimist, a half-empty bottle. In everyday behavior, we confuse both levels, leading to the discourses of first and second order.

The first refers to the ways of expression in which reality is seen as "something" external from the perceiving subject but perceivable through the senses, therefore it is there to be discovered.

The second-order discourse includes the subject in the description of reality, leading to possible alternative explanations. An expression of first order would be "Your opinion is wrong;" while a second order expression would be "I do not agree with your opinion".

We work on interpersonal differential impact of each mode of communication and the possibility of transforming the expressions from one way to another. It is also clear that both ways are valid to communicate, but they can be more or less adaptive in different contexts.

- *Axioms of human communication*

Based on the above, we focus on what Watzlawick, Bean, and Jackson (1997) called *axioms of human communication*. These axioms are pragmatic guidelines of all human communication events which we cannot avoid and that we all follow, even without realizing we do. The first one states that it is *impossible not to communicate*, so it makes explicit that any kind of behavior communicates, since the behavior in itself is communication, even when we do not intend to make it work that way. Therefore, to remain silent, to daydream or not to listen to what someone is saying, communicates our lack of desire or interest to communicate, and our concern for other issues.

The second axiom has to do with two types of communication, *analog* and *digital*. The former is shared with other animals, as it was acquired during the process of the evolution of the species. It includes gestures, facial expression, voice inflection, rhythm, cadence and sequence of words. On the other hand, the digital language consists of words of each language that we use to transmit messages. The authors note that each message is poor without taking into account any of the levels because they are complementary and because they provide information that helps the speaker to send the message he/she wants to convey.

The third axiom is the one that refers to *content and relational* aspects. The first one refers to what the subject tries to say; the second one involves what kind of relationship is implied in what was said. This principle allows us to understand how the same words expressed differently can communicate admiration, contempt, respect or fear.

The next axiom refers to the "*punctuation*" of the sequence of events. People tend to interpret communication exchanges as an event with a start and end, limited and specific. This axiom shows that communication is a social process, in which every cut is arbitrary, and generally responds to one's own specific expectations and that of others. Thus, a marital argument may have started with a message, according to one of the actors, and due to another event for the other. Both are wrong thinking the argument had a specific origin, but may agree -if they understand that the other's account can be as valid as their own- to accept that both are partial cuts of a complex reality.

Finally, we work on the axiom that describes the power in human relations of *symmetry* and *complementarity*. The authors stress that there is room for an equal, superior or inferior relationship depending on whom the subjects relate with. The positions themselves are not pathological or healthy, but it may happen that, depending on the situation, the bond has a pathological behavior when these positions are not flexible and interchangeable. It is fundamental to consider these kinds of affective bonds to perceive and reflect on human relationships. Instead, a positive resource that will promote health and quality of life would be when the leadership may be held by different members in a couple or group of people, depending on the ability of each to solve a problem or challenge.

- *Practical skills*

Following the theoretical work described in the previous paragraphs, a second stage of the course begins with a series of practical skills.

The focus now is to clarify the notion of social skills defined as a set of specific, learned (and modifiable) complex behaviors of interpersonal relationships (Caballo, 1993). The aim is to promote flexibility in the patterns of behavior and thought, displacing the myth that the way we relate to others is part of our personality ("our way of life"), to emphasize on the product of learning from the role models we related with. A central issue in this stage of the course is to work the ecological perspective of personal resources; tools that may have been useful in a certain moment of life can become useless in a different stage. Thus, the tools that were used by a person in his youth may not be of help for a youngster today. (Bronfenbrenner, 1987). Thus, it is fundamental to positively work on diminishing the importance of certain values and self-identity, shifting the focus from the suffering to the need for adaption in order to encourage personal development. Subsequently, the concept of assertiveness is introduced, understood as the capacity of asserting one's own rights without being manipulated or manipulating others (Castanyer, 1996). From this concept, two specific behaviors are worked: the request and the denial to a request. Conceptual notions are shown and then scenarios are conducted dealing with the elderly's everyday conflict situations; for example, asking their children to return borrowed money and telling them that they can no longer take care of grandchildren for as long as they used to. Next, they work on *the interpersonal conflict resolution*, through the presentation of an approach that prioritizes the coherence between goals (achieving a personal goal or taking care of the relationship) and the most positive strategy to meet those goals (competition, avoidance, collaboration or accommodation) (Cascón, 2000). As with assertiveness, affective bond conflict is exposed and each participant is encouraged to identify how to prioritize goals and what behavior he/she should take according to this approach. This activity aims to draw attention to the personal style, the resources and the deficits that the person may have in this type of skills. It becomes a moment of learning and training in itself.

- *The affective bonds from the paradigm of complexity*

The aim of the workshop is to present the notion of paradigm of complexity in relationships. Thus, uncertainty is presented as an inherent component of reality, which is considered as a positive aspect, implying change and learning potential. It also reinforces the idea of an "under construction" reality, which we should not assume, but where we should inquire and express our own needs and desires (Gonzalez Soto, 1999).

Teaching resources

Based on the objectives of the workshop, varied and flexible resources are used depending on the needs of each topic and each group. As a basic resource, the slide show is used with keywords and schemes that favor the display of abstract communication processes. Since the course deals with the reflection on every day and automatic processes, the ability to display a specific type of communication process is a highly effective teaching resource. Working on assertiveness and problem solving, cartoons are used to address through the simulation technique, less emotional complex interpersonal scenarios that those experienced by the participants. A cartoon example is as follows:

Juana is 72 years old, she was always a proud woman of family values, which today would be considered conservative. She had been raised in this way and lived her marriage likewise, as her husband had had a similar upbringing – Ernesto died eight years ago. In the years after his death there were many changes in Juana's family, her son separated and met a new partner very quickly. Soon, her daughter broke up with her husband on bad terms, and even today, they have a poor relationship. Juana felt her way of living, thinking did not seem to adapt to these times, and this caused her great sadness.

Faced with the turbulent times her children went through, Juana was always there for her grandchildren and had a great bond with them. As a result, she was the first one to know that Sophia, her youngest granddaughter on her daughter's side, was pregnant. Sofia was 19 years old and although she had been dating her boyfriend Joaquin for a long time, pregnancy was not on the agenda. Facing up the news, they decided to move in together and to raise a family. Juana felt that this was not good news, but she saw her granddaughter and Joaquin were happy planning how to cope with the situation responsibly, prioritizing the well-being of their unborn child. She was proud of her granddaughter and wished to support and help her to face this challenge.

Problem: Sofia asked her grandmother for help and support after telling her mother the news of the pregnancy and the moving. She knows it will be difficult because her mother is very resentful of her father and distrusts men in general.

*WRITE A DIALOGUE WHERE JUANA EXPRESSES HER OPINION ON
THE SUBJECT.*

Finally, in order to facilitate the understanding and empathy for inter-individual differences, we propose incorporating film analysis. Such activities have been highlighted for their potential to generate empathy towards diversity, promote understanding of the subtleties of human thought and behavior and facilitate thoughtful dialogue. From the analysis of the plot (text) and the psychological and cultural environment where it takes place (subtext), meanings and inferences about the more or less functional relationships are created. (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). Observational learning provides positive role models (characters whose characteristics favor the successful personal experience), negative role models (characters that show behavior that generate discomfort) or transitional role models (characters that modify negative traits and acquire functional guidelines). The latter prove to be the most powerful, since they visualize the changes in the psychological process. Moreover, this being a workshop, learning occurs from sharing ideas, experiences and reflections among peers. Thus, critical thinking skills that allow the constructivist evaluation of contradictory arguments are stimulated, favoring interpersonal validation of the different possible readings (Bluestone, 2000).

Conclusions

The human communication course for seniors is a tool to promote development and well-being in old age. It is planned from a horizontal perspective, in which the personal contributions of the participants are privileged, allowing for a rich theoretical reflection. In the experiment carried out in the city of Mar del Plata, the trust reached between students and instructors was the key to achieve its objectives. It would be paradoxical to think of a communication course without the group environment working in an inclusive, thoughtful and positive way. We hope that from the guidelines presented above, it will be possible to enhance and improve the experience in other contexts, in order to promote positive aging for seniors in our communities.

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