

The “W-E-L-C-O-M-E” attributes of a good family planning counselor

Prof. Ani Etokidem summarizes the personal attributes or characteristics of a good counselor using the acronym ‘WELCOME’.

Introduction

This paper summarizes the personal attributes or characteristics of a good counselor using the acronym ‘WELCOME’. This is based on experience gained from many years of counseling family planning clients. These attributes would also be found useful by counselors generally. ‘W’ represents ‘Warmth’, ‘E’ represents ‘Empathy’, ‘L’ represents ‘Listen/ Language’, ‘C’ represents ‘Confidence/Confidentiality’, ‘O’ represents ‘Objectivity’, ‘M’ represents ‘Mannerism’ while ‘E’ represents ‘Emotional balance’.

Family planning counsellors are familiar with ‘G-A-T-H-E-R.’ (1). While ‘G-A-T-H-E-R’ deals with the approach to family planning, ‘W-E-L-C-O-M-E’ deals with the characteristics of the counsellor. Both ‘G-A-T-H-E-R’ and ‘W-E-L-C-O-M-E’ can complement each other and make family planning counselling easy for the counselor and acceptable to the counselee.

W-E-L-C-O-M-E

W=WARMTH

A good counselor displays warmth towards the client and therefore gives them a warm welcome. This will facilitate establishment of confidence and rapport compared to a cold reception which will make the establishment of rapport difficult, if not impossible. There are instances when clients find it difficult to voice out what they want, even to tell the counsellor that they want to have family planning services. Lack of rapport may disorientate the client. There are situations where clients tell the family planning provider something like: ‘Sorry, I think I am in the wrong place, I actually wanted to complain about headache. I can’t tell how I managed to find myself in the family planning section’ whereas in reality, they needed family planning but were put off and or confused by the cold reception accorded to them by the counselor/provider.

E=EMPATHY

An empathic (not sympathetic) counselor will be careful in the choice of words and approach to the client. This is because the provider/counselor has been able to imagine and share the feelings of the client; they have been able to wear the clients’ shoes. Blaming the client for the previous pregnancy which would have been prevented by family planning or blaming her for coming late to the clinic would only disorientate and confuse the client and cause them to lose

confidence in the health system. This may result in their refusal to utilize the services.

L=LISTEN/ LANGUAGE

“L” stands for listen. Good counselors are good listeners. They listen to the client and allow them time to express themselves. The counselor listens with attention to the client’s questions, queries, concerns and provides the answers to the issues raised. Where the counselor does not understand the issues raised by the client, they can ask the clients to repeat or clarify. If there are issues the counselor cannot handle but which some other staff can, there is nothing wrong with referring the client to that staff.

‘L’ can also stand for “Language” The good counselor avoids unnecessary professional jargons that may end up confusing the client. The counselor should come down to the level of the client and avoid the use of foul language that may hurt the client’s feelings. It may be necessary to explain certain issues or terminologies in the client’s language, if the counselor is well versed in it and, especially if the client is not well versed in the official language. For providers who work in foreign lands and may not be well versed in the local language, it may be necessary to get an interpreter. Every step must be taken to ensure that the interpreter will maintain confidentiality of information obtained from the client.

C=CONFIDENCE/CONFIDENTIALITY

The good counselor displays self-confidence while talking to the client. This should not be mistaken for arrogance. For this to happen, the counselor must have a good knowledge of the subject matter. In family planning for instance, the good counselor should know the basics of how the method works. They should also understand issues around side effects and how to explain them to the client. The counselor must be able to address issues raised by the client with confidence. In these days where there is a lot of false medical information in the social media and in the internet, a counselor that does not have a firm grip of the subject matter may be easily jolted when the client asks questions or presents some “facts” they have obtained from these sources.

The good counselor assures the client of confidentiality and maintains this confidentiality even after the client is no longer alive.

O= OBJECTIVITY

An objective, non-judgmental counsellor will achieve the desired results. As a display of objectivity, the good counselor ensures that their personal feelings about the client do not influence the counseling process. The counselor should not allow personal biases to becloud professional conduct. In most African societies for instance, having children is taken as an insurance for old age. A situation where the counselor starts wondering why the client who has not yet had children or who is newly married is requesting for family planning can lead to a missed opportunity. Some counselors display personal preferences for certain family planning methods and they try to force such preferences on their clients. This should not be so.

M=MANNERISM

A well-mannered, non-radical attitude is a pre-requisite for effective counseling. Good mannerism involves respect for the client as a person, respect for their views, even if they are wrong. Clients are very sensitive to the countenance, nuances and gestures of counselors. Some of these may be very suggestive to clients. Clients may interpret some of these differently from their intended meanings. Depending on their interpretation, clients may be put off completely. This could lead to a missed opportunity and even loss in confidence in the entire system.

E=Emotional intelligence/balance

An emotionally-intelligent counselor is more likely to display the above-mentioned characteristics than one that is the opposite. A counselor’s level of emotional intelligence will influence the choice of words, gestures and nuances. Emotionally unstable counselors may allow happenings around them, their family challenges, work-related challenges, the work environment and other stressors, to influence, (often negatively), the care they give to their clients. Emotionally intelligent counselors are able to handle personal challenges in a way that does not interfere with the care they give to their clients

Reference

1. Population Reports.
<https://www.k4health.org/sites/default/files/j48.pdf>

Written by: Prof. Ani Etokidem, Department of Community Medicine, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria & Department of Community Medicine, University of Calabar Teaching Hospital Calabar, Nigeria
Email: etokidem@etokidem.com