

Teaching communication in the context of drug abuse prevention in the workplace

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Teaching communication should not be only theoretical input given by some expert. Communication skills need practise and training, especially on topics which are interesting for the trainees and relevant in their further professional work.

Every occupational health physician sometimes has to face situations which are not really comfortable as you have to speak about awkward, displeasing or embarrassing items, for example when people are drunk at work or a suspicion of drug abuse has to be dealt with.

Either you as OHP suspect an employee to be addicted to drugs and wonder how you should tell him, or the department head urges you to act concerning a drunk employee where as you think, that it is the duty of the management to take the initiative.

Our trainees get a twenty-hours instruction about drug abuse prevention in the workplace, they learn about

- biological and psychological mechanisms of dependency
- legal and illegal substances causing dependency
- legal aspects of dependency
- the specific effects of alcohol and their impact on safety at work
- the key role of the superior for tackling drug problems at work

Three hours are provided for specific training to handle situations with awkward and difficult conversation.

The trainees are split in groups of about 10 persons, each group accompanied by one experienced tutor.

To begin with everyone is invited to say if he or she ever had any bad experience in a situation of difficult or embarrassing communication or if he could imagine a situation he would be afraid of.

After they get a short repetition of basic aspects of communication:

Why is it sometime difficult to understand each other?

Some typical faults:

The speaker does not organise his thoughts before speaking or he tries go put too much information and ideas in one sentence.

Sometimes, when he is unsure if he has been understood, he goes on speaking and speaking and repeating his ideas instead of giving the other time to reflect and answer.

The listener on the other hand sometimes does not listen attentively; his mind is already busy formulating an answer. He tends to hear only details he is annoyed about instead of trying to understand the specific point of what has been said. Sometimes he even thinks he can read the thoughts of the other and so he answers to things which have not been said.

On the other hand you have to take into account that any communication includes different layers of meaning which should be regarded separately:

Most people think communication is about facts. But – not so easy to see – communication is also about non spoken wishes and expectations, and it is

about relationship. How do I see the other, do I appreciate him, do I give him the freedom to decide or do I try to direct and manipulate him? Unfortunately these layers are not clearly visible, they are closely merged and it is not easy to analyse them separately. Especially the layer of relationship influences communication, and many problems and conflicts which seem to be about facts have their real source on the layer of relationship. Unfortunately, problems on relationship cannot be solved on the layer of facts.

Another crucial point to be regarded in communication is to analyse ones personal reaction in a differentiated way: In perceiving actions of other people I should discriminate three procedures inside me:

First: What do I seize? What can I see, hear?

Second: How do I interpret that? It is my interpretation which gives meaning to what I have noticed.

It is my interpretation that tells me, for example, if a question posed to me is a mere question or a criticism, and it is my interpretation that tells me if a glance is contemptuous or curious.

My interpretation can be right or wrong. It is not possible to avoid interpretations, and it is not useful, for without interpreting it is not possible to understand the essential content of a message.

Third: Having cleared your perception and your interpretation, you should analyse your personal feelings about that.

What kinds of feelings are triggered by this action, by these pictures inside me?

We react to our perception and our interpretation by personal feelings. These feelings are strongly influenced by our actual emotional status. These feelings are not to be judged as good or bad, they are just facts we should take notice of.

Having understood this we can realize that our reaction to another person is just our personal reaction; it is our subjective interpretation and our responsibility.

Active listening and avoiding of communication-blockers are techniques that help to continue a positive process of dialogue. By verbal and nonverbal means I express my interest in my partner and his opinions, for example by repeating with my own words, subsuming, asking and so on.

On the other hand there are several communication-blockers which should be avoided.

If people get orders, warnings, judgements or are made look silly, it is no more possible to dialogue at eye level.

Last but not least our trainees are informed how to give feed back and about the value of getting feed back.

Feed back can help me to reduce my blind spot, a part of my personality which I don't perceive myself, but which can be seen by others.

I have the opportunity to learn, how other people see me. Feed back is a like a present given to me by others, I can open and accept it or not.

After this theoretical introduction which is given for it has to be applied afterwards, we begin the active training.

The trainees divide into two person groups; the task is to interview each other in a structured manner about each others behaviour of drinking alcohol. The aim is to understand how difficult it can be to ask such information and how embarrassing it may be, on the other hand, to be asked such information. Subsequently the group gathers and everybody is invited to report his feelings while interviewing and being interviewed.

The main training element is two hours of role-play.

Two persons, one of them in the role of an OHP, have to play a specific situation; the aim is to gain skills to handle complicated communication situations.

The participants are asked if they want to repeat a real situation which was perceived as difficult or embarrassing or if they want to train a specific issue which they would be afraid of if it would happen in reality.

If this is not the case, some virtual cases are prepared to train with.

One of the cases is about an employee who is sent to the OHP by his superior. The employee just wishes to get a document that he has been given advice by the OHP, he does not want to give any information about the problem.

The aim of this role play is to gain the employee's confidence.

In another case the OHP has to reject a request put on him by the management. The aim is to handle an ethical dilemma between the desire to stay on good relationship with the management and not acting unethically.

In a third case the OHP has to clarify roles and to tell the management to do their duty by themselves and not to push it off onto the occupational physician.

The two role players have to play in a serious manner, to begin with the reception of the respective partner, offering a seat and opening conversation. At a given point the tutor interrupts the play. Both players are asked how they felt in their roles and how they experienced the other in his role.

Subsequently the rest of the group who had witnessed the play and the tutor give feed back to both of the players, giving special regard to the before mentioned basic aspects of communication.

Thereafter another team of role players either gets the same scenario to play or another. It is also possible to have the same scenario once more played by the same players with small variations in the behaviour of one of the partners. Often it can be demonstrated that little changes in attitude or argumentation can lead to quite different results.

The acceptance of this kind of communication-training is generally good. Most trainees say that they learned much and would appreciate to have more time for this kind of training. At first some are a little doubtful, but the tutor normally succeeds to create a trustful atmosphere. Some trainees even prove to be real actors, and so this kind of teaching is fun for teachers and trainees.

Sometimes trainees do not like to produce themselves in public, so they are not forced to. This is the reason we prefer groups of about ten participants: everybody has the chance to take part himself, but if someone does not want to, it is no problem.

Thank you for your attention.

Do you have any questions or comments?