



## Free Attention

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Free attention: attention that is free of any self focused thoughts or feelings in the person giving attention (the listener). The listener's attention is freely available for the other person.

Free attention is a strong intervention, intervening in the other person's process (of thoughts and feelings). It supports the other person to open up, particularly emotionally.

The listener has a steady, open, friendly expression, a smile that is not a smile, an expression of delight in the other person, whatever they are doing or saying. Free attention is intended to show unconditional support and encouragement. The listener does not, therefore, have a blank or serious face. This conveys something more like lack of interest or disapproval.

Free attention is used in other approaches to listening, counselling and psychotherapy. It is similar to the '**Unconditional positive regard**' of person centred counselling. It has a big effect on people who are not used to it and is often not appropriate outside of co-counselling.

There are two approaches to the listener's mental activity:

1. The listener aims to empty their mind of any thoughts. In effect the listener is meditating on the other person.
2. The listener attends to the other person's process. They try to understand what patterns the other person may be running either in the situations they are working on or in the session and what the history of those patterns might be. They think about what techniques the other person might use to work on their material.

It is possible that the other person may pick this up as a sense that the listener is giving really good attention or they may intuit and try the techniques that the listener is thinking of.

Free attention is basic to co-counselling. **Clients** in a CCI session may, and often do, ask for a **Free attention Contract** and the counsellor (the listener) only gives free attention. Even if the counsellor asks for a normal contract, most of what the counsellor will do is to give free attention, with the occasional suggestion about techniques to use.

### Nodding and smiling

These are part of normal conversation. They intervene in the talkers process in three ways:

1. They indicate that the listener has heard and has some understanding of what the speaker has said.
2. They reassure the talker.
3. They can indicate agreement with the talker.

In co-counselling sessions:

1. The counsellor is not concerned with the content of the client's work except as far as it gives some information about the client's process. It is normal for co-counsellors to have sessions with people working in a language they do not understand, working non verbally or even working in gibberish.
2. The client does not need reassurance. Co-counselling takes the view that everyone is fundamentally OK. Not reassuring is an effective contradiction that is rooted in CCI co-counselling and is an important part of why CCI co-counselling is so empowering.
3. Everything that the client works on is OK. Any indication that the counsellor agrees with anything undermines this general presumption and can be experienced as commenting on the client's work.

Many CCI trainers would regard a client's need for their counsellor to nod and smile, or for the counsellor to feel that they have to do so, as indications that they have not yet learned free attention on a core training course and would not accredit them to be co-counsellors until they had done so.

**See also in CoCoPedia:**

[Balance Of Attention  
Session](#)

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