

## CHAPTER

## 4

# INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATION AND THE SKILL OF VISIBLY TUNING IN TO CLIENTS

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S: Face the client *Squarely*

O: Adopt an *Open* posture

L: Remember that it is possible at times to *Lean* toward the other

E: Maintain good *Eye* contact

R: Try to be relatively *Relaxed* or natural in these behaviors

## THE SHADOW SIDE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE IN HELPING

Conversations between helpers and their clients should be a therapeutic or helping *dialogue*. Interpersonal communication competence means not only being good at the individual communication skills outlined in this and following chapters but also marshaling them at the service of dialogue. There are four requirements for true dialogue (Egan, in press):

- **Turn taking.** Dialogue is interactive. You talk, then I talk. In counseling, this means that, generally speaking, monologues on the part of either client or helper don't add value. On the other hand, turn taking opens up the possibility for mutual learning. Helpers learn about their clients and base their interventions on what they come to understand through the give-and-take of the dialogue. Clients come to understand themselves and their concerns more fully and learn how to face up to the challenge their problems and opportunities present.

- **Connecting.** What each person says in the conversation should be connected in some way to what the other person has said. The helper's comments should be connected to the client's remarks and, ideally, vice versa. Helper and client need to engage each other if their working alliance is to be productive.

- **Mutual influencing.** Each party in a dialogue should be open to being influenced by what the other person says. This echoes the social-influence dimension of counseling discussed in Chapter 3. Helpers certainly influence their clients, and the best helpers learn from and are influenced by their clients. Therefore, counselors need to be open-minded and help their clients to be open to new learning.

- **Cocreating outcomes.** Good dialogue leads to outcomes that benefit both parties. As we have seen, counseling is about results, accomplishments, outcomes. The job of the counselor is neither to tell clients what to do nor merely to leave them to their own devices. The counselor should act as a catalyst for the kind of problem-managing dialogue that helps clients find their own answers. In true dialogue, neither party should know exactly what the outcome will be. If the counselor knows what he or she is going to tell a client, or if the client has already decided what he or she is going to say and do, the two of them may well have a conversation, but it is probably not a dialogue. Only clients can change themselves, but because of the helping dialogue, these changes will have the mark of effective helpers on them.

Dialogue is beginning to be discussed in mental health (Corrigan, Lickey, Schmook, Virgil, & Juricek, 1999) and other human service settings such as medicine (Hellstroem, 1998). Dialogue is essential because helping is a collaborative endeavor (Roberts, 1998). It is through dialogue that helpers act as catalysts for change. It is through dialogue that clients give expression to their responsibility and accountability for change in their lives. Bugas and Silberschatz (2000) even see clients as "coaches" for their helpers. Clients should "prompt, instruct, and educate" their helpers to key aspects of themselves and their plans to accomplish treatment goals. If helpers and clients alike are to avoid the kind of "negative process" mentioned in Chapter 3, they must engage in transparent dialogue.

While individual communication skills are a necessary part of communication competence, dialogue is the integrating mechanism. Individual skills are the building blocks for effective dialogue. The first skill—called attending or, more colloquially, visibly tuning in—is discussed and illustrated in this chapter. Chapter 5 focuses on active listening. Empathy in the form of sharing empathic highlights is the topic in Chapter 6. Finally, probing and summarizing, the last of the basic communication skills, are dealt with in Chapter 7. The advanced communication skills needed to challenge clients or help them challenge themselves are outlined and illustrated in Chapters 10, 11, and 12. All these skills serve every stage and every step of the helping process.

These skills are not special skills peculiar to helping. Rather, they are extensions of the kinds of skills all of us need in our everyday interpersonal transactions. Ideally, helpers-to-be would enter training programs with this basic set of interpersonal communication skills in place, and training would simply help them adapt the skills to the helping process. Unfortunately, that is often not the case. Indeed, some of the problems clients have either focus on or are complicated by a lack of interpersonal communication skills.

Of course, effective helpers weave these communication skills together seamlessly in their interactions with clients. Communication skills need to become "second nature" if they are to serve the helping process and clients' needs. Bob Carkhuff (1987), Allen Ivey (Ivey & Ivey, 1999), and Carl Rogers (1951, 1957, 1965) were trailblazers in developing and humanizing communication skills and integrating them into the helping process. Their influence is seen throughout this book. In this text, these communication skills are described, outlined, and illustrated. The manual that accompanies this text, *Exercises in Helping Skills*, provides more extensive practice in all of them.

### VISIBLY TUNING IN TO CLIENTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHIC PRESENCE

At some of the more dramatic moments of life, simply being with another person is extremely important. If a friend of yours is in the hospital, just your being there can make a difference, even if conversation is impossible. Similarly, being with a friend who has just lost his wife can be very comforting to him, even if little is said. Your empathic presence is comforting. Most people appreciate it when others pay attention to them. By the same token, being ignored is often painful: The averted face is too often a sign of the averted heart. Given how sensitive most of us are to others' attention or inattention, it is paradoxical how insensitive we can be at times about paying attention to others.

Helping and other deep interpersonal transactions demand a certain robustness or intensity of presence. Attending, that is, visibly tuning in to others, contributes to this presence. Visibly tuning in as an expression of empathy tells clients that you are with them, and it puts you in a position to listen carefully to their concerns. Your attention can be manifested in both physical and psychological ways. Let's start by briefly exploring nonverbal behavior as a channel of communication.

### Nonverbal Behavior as a Channel of Communication

Over the years, both researchers and practitioners have come to appreciate the importance of nonverbal behavior in counseling (Andersen, 1999; Ekman, 1992, 1993; Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Ekman & Rosenberg, 1998; Grace, Kivlighan, & Kuncze, 1995; Hicksen & Stacks, 1993; Highlen & Hill, 1984; Knapp & Hall, 1996; McCroskey, 1993; Mehrabian, 1971, 1972, 1981; Norton, 1983; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000; Russell, 1995; Russell, Fernandez-Dols, & Mandler, 1997; for a wealth of information about nonverbal behavior see the following Internet site: <http://www3.usal.es/~nonverbal/introduction.htm>). Highlen and Hill suggest that nonverbal behaviors regulate conversations, communicate emotions, modify verbal messages, provide important messages about the helping relationship, give insights into self-perceptions, and provide clues that clients (or counselors) are not saying what they are thinking. This area has taken on even more importance because of the multicultural nature of helping.

The face and body are extremely communicative. We know from experience that even when people are together in silence, the atmosphere can be filled with messages. Sometimes the facial expressions, bodily motions, voice quality, and physiological responses of clients communicate more than their words do.

Studies in nonverbal behavior should not be overinterpreted. Taken together, however, they highlight the importance of nonverbal behavior in the communication process. The following factors, on the part of both helpers and clients, play an important role in the therapeutic dialogue:

- *Bodily behavior*, such as posture, body movements, and gestures.
- *Eye behavior*, such as eye contact, staring, and eye movement.
- *Facial expressions*, such as smiles, frowns, raised eyebrows, and twisted lips.
- *Voice-related behavior*, such as tone of voice, pitch, volume, intensity, inflection, spacing of words, emphases, pauses, silences, and fluency.
- *Observable autonomic physiological responses*, such as quickened breathing, blushing, paleness, and pupil dilation.
- *Physical characteristics*, such as fitness, height, weight, and complexion.
- *Space*; that is, how close or far a person chooses to be during a conversation.
- *General appearance*, such as grooming and dress.

People constantly "speak" to one another through their nonverbal behavior. Effective helpers learn this "language" and how to use it effectively in their interactions with their clients. They also learn how to "read" relevant messages embedded in the nonverbal behavior of their clients.

### Helpers' Nonverbal Behavior

Before you begin interpreting the nonverbal behavior of your clients (discussed in Chapter 5), take a look at yourself. You speak to your clients through all the nonverbal categories outlined in the previous section. At times, your nonverbal behavior is as important as or even more important than your words. Your nonverbal behavior influences clients for better or worse. In your nonverbal behavior, clients read cues that indicate the quality of your presence to them. Attentive presence can invite or

encourage them to trust you, open up, and explore the significant dimensions of their problem situations. Half-hearted presence can promote distrust and lead to clients' reluctance to reveal themselves to you. Clients might misinterpret your nonverbal behavior. For instance, you might be comfortable with the space between you and your client, but it is too close for the client. Or remaining silent might in your mind mean giving a client time to think, but the client might feel embarrassed. Part of listening, then, is being sensitive to clients' reactions to your nonverbal behavior.

Effective helpers are mindful of the stream of nonverbal messages they send to clients. Reading your own bodily reactions is an important first step. For instance, if you feel your muscles tensing as the client talks to you, you can say to yourself, "I'm getting anxious here. What's going on? And what nonverbal messages indicating my discomfort am I sending to the client?" Again, you probably would not use these words. Rather you read the signals your body is sending you without letting them distract you from your client.

You can also use your body to censor instinctive or impulsive messages that you feel are inappropriate. For instance, if the client says something that instinctively angers you, you can control the external expression of the anger (for instance, a sour look) to give yourself time to reflect. Such self-control is not phony because your respect for your client takes precedence over your instinctive reactions. Not dumping your annoyance or anger on your clients through nonverbal behavior is not the same as denying it. Becoming aware of it is the first step in dealing with it.

In a more positive vein, you can "punctuate" what you say with nonverbal messages. For instance, Denise is especially attentive when Jennie talks about actions she could take to do something about her problem situation. She leans forward, nods, and says "uh-huh." She uses nonverbal behavior to reinforce Jennie's intention to act.

On the other hand, don't become preoccupied with your body and the qualities of your voice as a source of communication. Rather, learn to use your body instinctively as a means of communication. Being aware of and at home with nonverbal communication can reflect an inner peace with yourself, with the helping process, and with your clients. Your nonverbal behavior should enhance rather than stand in the way of your working alliance with your clients.

Although you can learn the skills of visibly tuning in, they will be phony if they are not driven by the attitudes and values, such as respect and empathy, discussed in Chapter 3. Your mind set—what's in your heart—is as important as your visible presence. If you are not actively interested in the welfare of a client, or if you resent working with a client, subtle or not-so-subtle nonverbal clues will color your behavior. I once mentioned to a doctor my concerns about an invasive diagnostic procedure he intended to use. The doctor said the right words to reassure me, but his physical presence and the way he rushed his words said, "I've heard this dozens of times. I really don't have time for your concerns. Let's get on with this." His words were right but the real communication was in the nonverbal messages that accompanied his words.

### The Skill of Visibly Tuning in to Clients

You can use certain key nonverbal skills to visibly tune in to clients. These skills can be summarized in the acronym SOLER. Since communication skills are particularly sensitive to cultural differences, care should be taken in adapting what follows to different cultures. This is only a framework:

**S:** Face the client *Squarely*; that is, adopt a posture that indicates involvement. In North American culture, facing another person squarely is often considered a basic posture of involvement. It usually says, "I'm here with you; I'm available to you." Turning your body away from another person while you talk to him or her can lessen your degree of contact with that person. Even when people are seated in a circle, they usually try in some way to turn toward the individuals to whom they are speaking. The word *squarely* here should not be taken too literally. *Squarely* is not a military term. The point is that your bodily orientation should convey the message that you are involved with the client. If, for any reason, facing the person squarely is too threatening, then an angled position may be more helpful. The point is not inches and angles but the quality of your presence. Your body sends out messages whether you like it or not. Make them congruent with what you are trying to do.

**O:** Adopt an *Open* posture. Crossed arms and crossed legs can be signs of lessened involvement with or availability to others. An open posture can be a sign that you're open to the client and to what he or she has to say. In North American culture, an open posture is generally seen as a nondefensive posture. Again, the word *open* can be taken literally or metaphorically. If your legs are crossed, this does not mean that you are not involved with the client. But it is important to ask yourself, "To what degree does my present posture communicate openness and availability to the client?" If you are empathic and open-minded, let your posture mirror what is in your heart.

**L:** Remember that it is possible at times to *Lean* toward the other. Watch two people in a restaurant who are intimately engaged in conversation. Very often they are both leaning forward over the table as a natural sign of their involvement. The main thing is to remember that the upper part of your body is on a hinge. It can move toward a person and back away. In North American culture, a slight inclination toward a person is often seen as saying, "I'm with you, I'm interested in you and in what you have to say." Leaning back (the severest form of which is a slouch) can be a way of saying, "I'm not entirely with you" or "I'm bored." Leaning too far forward, however, or doing so too soon, may frighten a client. It can be seen as a way of placing a demand on the other for some kind of closeness or intimacy. In a wider sense, the word *lean* can refer to a kind of bodily flexibility or responsiveness that enhances your communication with a client. And bodily flexibility can mirror mental flexibility.

**E:** Maintain good *Eye* contact. In North American culture, fairly steady eye contact is not unnatural for people deep in conversation. It is not the same as staring. Again, watch two people deep in conversation. You may be amazed at the amount of direct eye contact. Maintaining good eye contact with a client is another way of saying, "I'm with you; I'm interested; I want to hear what you have to say." Obviously, this principle is not violated if you occasionally look away. Indeed, you have to if you don't want to stare. But if you catch yourself looking away frequently, your behavior might give you a hint about some kind of reluctance to be with this person or to get involved with him or her. Or it might say something about your own

discomfort. In other cultures, however, too much eye contact, especially with someone in a position of authority, is out of order. I have learned much about the cultural meaning of eye contact from my Asian students and clients.

**R:** Try to be relatively *Relaxed* or *natural* in these behaviors. Being relaxed means two things: First, it means not fidgeting nervously or engaging in distracting facial expressions; the client might wonder what's making you nervous. Second, it means becoming comfortable with using your body as a vehicle of personal contact and expression. Your being natural in the use of these skills helps put the client at ease.

A counselor trained in the skilled helper model was teaching counseling to visually impaired students in the Royal National College for the Blind. Most of her clients were visually impaired. However, she wrote this about SOLER:

In counseling students who are blind or visually impaired, eye contact has little or no relevance. However, attention on voice direction is extremely important, and people with a visual impairment will tell you how insulted they feel when sighted people are talking to them while looking somewhere else.

I teach SOLER as part of listening and attending skills and can adapt each letter of the acronym [to my visually impaired students] with the exception of the E. . . . After much thought, I would like to change your acronym to SOLAR, the A being for "Aim," that is, aim your head and body in the direction of your client so that when they hear your voice, be it linguistically or paralinguistically, they know that you are attending directly to what they are saying (private communication).

This counselor's comments underscore the fact that people are more sensitive to how you orient yourself to them nonverbally than you might imagine. Anything that distracts from your "being there" can harm the dialogue. The point to be stressed is that a respectful, empathic, genuine, and caring mind set might well lose its impact if the client does not see these internal attitudes reflected in your external behaviors. In the beginning, you may become overly self-conscious about the way you visibly tune in, especially if you are not used to being attentive. Still, the guidelines just presented are only that—guidelines. They should not be taken as absolute rules to be applied rigidly in all cases. Box 4-1 summarizes, in question form, the main points related to being visibly tuned in to clients. Turn to the *Exercises in Helping Skills* for opportunities to "practice" the skill of visibly tuning in.

### THE SHADOW SIDE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Interpersonal communication competence is critical for effective everyday living. It is the principal enabling skill for just about everything we do. Yet it is, in my view, "forgotten" by society. In that respect it suffers a fate shared by a number of essential "life skills," such as problem solving, opportunity development, parenting, and managing (knowing how to make some system work), to name a few.

#### Box 4-1 Questions on Visibly Tuning In

- What are my attitudes toward this client?
- How would I rate the quality of my presence to this client?
- To what degree does my nonverbal behavior indicate a willingness to work with the client?
- What attitudes am I expressing in my nonverbal behavior?
- What attitudes am I expressing in my verbal behavior?
- To what degree does the client experience me as effectively present and working with him or her?
- To what degree does my nonverbal behavior reinforce my internal attitudes?
- In what ways am I distracted from giving my full attention to this client? What am I doing to handle these distractions? How might I be more effectively present to this person?

Let me make my point. In lecturing, I have often asked audiences to answer two questions. The first question goes something like this:

Given the importance of effective human relationships in just about every area of life, how important is it for your kids to develop a solid set of interpersonal communication skills? On a scale from 1 to 100, how high would you rate the importance?

Inevitably, the ratings are at the high end, always near 100. The second question goes something like this:

Given the importance of these skills, where do your kids pick them up? How does society make sure that they acquire them? In what forums do they learn them?

Then the hemming and hawing begin. "Well, I guess they get some of them at home. That is, if they find good role models at home." Or, "Life itself is the best teacher of these skills. They learn them on the run." The members of the audience mill around like that for a while, until I say,

Let me summarize what I've been hearing. And, by the way, it's no different from what I hear every place else. Although most parents rate the importance of these sets of skills very high, we live in a society that leaves their development to chance. Practically nothing is done systematically to make sure that our kids learn these skills. And, by the way, there is no assurance that they will pick them up on the run.

Children learn a bit from their parents, they might get a dash in school, perhaps a soupçon of TV helps. But, in the main, they are more often exposed to poor communicators than good ones.

Ideally, helpers-to-be would arrive at training programs already equipped with a solid set of interpersonal communication skills. Training would help them adapt these skills to the counseling process. After all, basic interpersonal communication skills are not special skills peculiar to helping. Rather, they are extensions of the kinds of skills all of us need in our everyday interpersonal interactions. However, since trainees don't ordinarily arrive so equipped, they need time to come up to speed in communication competence. This, in a strange way, creates its own problem. Some helper-training programs focus almost exclusively on interpersonal communication skills. As a result, trainees know how to communicate but not necessarily how to help. Furthermore, most adults feel that they are "pretty good" at these skills. What they actually mean is that they see themselves as good as others.

# 5

## ACTIVE LISTENING: THE FOUNDATION OF UNDERSTANDING

### INADEQUATE LISTENING

- Nonlistening
- Partial listening
- Tape-recorder listening
- Rehearsing

### EMPATHIC LISTENING

#### LISTENING TO WORDS: CLIENTS' STORIES, POINTS OF VIEW, DECISIONS, AND INTENTIONS OR PROPOSALS

- Listening to Clients' Stories
  - Experiences
  - Behaviors
  - Affect: Feelings, emotions, and moods
- Listening to Clients' Points of View
- Listening to Clients' Decisions
- Listening to Clients' Intentions or Proposals
- "Hearing" Opportunities and Resources

#### LISTENING TO CLIENTS' NONVERBAL MESSAGES AND MODIFIERS

- Confirming or repeating
- Denying or confusing
- Strengthening or emphasizing
- Adding intensity
- Controlling or regulating

#### PROCESSING WHAT YOU HEAR: THE THOUGHTFUL SEARCH FOR MEANING

- Identify key messages and feelings
- Understand clients through context
- Hear the slant or spin: Tough-minded listening and processing
- Muse on what's missing