

and acceptance of the person of the client. At its worst, sympathy is a form of collusion with the client. Note the difference between Counselor A's response to Robin and Counselor B's response.

COUNSELOR A: This is not an easy thing to struggle with. It's even harder to talk about. It's even worse for someone who is as self-confident as you usually are.

ROBIN: I guess so.

Note that Robin does not respond very enthusiastically to collusion talk. She is interested in managing her problem. The helping process does not move forward. Let's see a different approach.

COUNSELOR B: You've got some misgivings about how you look, yet you wonder whether you're even justified talking about it.

ROBIN: I know. It's like I'm ashamed of my being ashamed. What's worse, I get so preoccupied with my body that I stop thinking of myself as a person. It blinds me to the fact that I more or less like the person I am.

Counselor B's response gives Robin the opportunity to deal with her immediate anxiety and then to explore her problem situation more fully.

Faking it. Clients are sometimes confused, distracted, and in a highly emotional state. All these conditions affect the clarity of what they are saying about themselves. Helpers may fail to pick up what clients are saying because of the clients' confusion or because clients are not stating their messages clearly. Or the helpers themselves may have become distracted in one way or another. In any case, it's a mistake to feign understanding. Genuine helpers admit that they are lost and then work to get back on track again. A statement like "I think I've lost you. Could we go over that once more?" indicates that you think it's important to stay with the client. It is a sign of respect. Admitting that you're lost is infinitely preferable to such clichés as "uh-huh," "um," and "I understand." On the other hand, if you often catch yourself saying that you don't understand, you'd better find out what's going on. Faking it is never a substitute for competence.

THE ART OF PROBING AND SUMMARIZING



NONVERBAL AND VERBAL PROMPTS

Nonverbal prompts

Vocal and verbal prompts

DIFFERENT FORMS OF PROBES

Statements

Requests

Questions

Words or phrases that are, in effect, questions or requests

USING QUESTIONS EFFECTIVELY

Ask a limited number of questions

Ask open-ended questions

PRINCIPLES IN THE USE OF PROBES

Use probes to help clients engage as fully as possible in the therapeutic dialogue

Use probes to help clients achieve concreteness and clarity

Use probes to help clients complete the picture

Use probes to help clients get a balanced view of problem situations and opportunities

Use probes to help clients move into more beneficial stages and steps of the helping process

Use probes to help clients move forward within some step of the helping process

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SHARING HIGHLIGHTS AND USING PROBES

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HOW TO BECOME PROFICIENT IN USING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

SHADOW-SIDE REALITIES OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

In most of the examples used in the discussion of sharing empathic highlights, the clients demonstrated a willingness to explore themselves and their behavior relatively freely. Obviously, this is not always the case. Although it is essential that helpers respond with highlights when their clients do reveal themselves, it is also necessary at times to encourage, prompt, and help clients explore their concerns when they fail to do so spontaneously. Therefore, the ability to use prompts and probes well is another important communication skill. If sharing highlights is the lubricant of dialogue, then probes provide often-needed nudges.

Prompts and probes are verbal and sometimes nonverbal tactics for helping clients talk more freely and concretely about any issue at any stage or step of the helping process. Counselors using probes help clients identify and explore opportunities they have been overlooking, clear up blind spots, translate dreams into realistic goals, come up with strategies for accomplishing goals, and work through obstacles to action. Probes, judiciously used, provide focus and direction for the entire helping process. They make it more efficient. But let's begin by looking at prompts.

NONVERBAL AND VERBAL PROMPTS

Prompts are brief verbal or nonverbal interventions designed to let clients know that you are with them and to encourage them to talk further.

Nonverbal prompts. You can use various behaviors—bodily movements, gestures, nods, eye movement, and the like—as nonverbal prompts. For example, a client who has been talking about how difficult it is to make a peace overture to a neighbor she is at odds with says, "I just can't do it!" The helper says nothing but simply leans forward attentively and waits. The client pauses and then says, "Well, you know what I mean. It would be very hard for me to take the first step. It would be like giving in. You know, weakness." They go on to explore how such an overture, properly done, could be a sign of strength rather than weakness.

Vocal and verbal prompts. You can use responses "um," "uh-huh," "sure," "yes," "I see," "ah," "okay," and "oh" as prompts, provided you use them intentionally and they are not simply a sign that your attention is flagging, you don't know what else to do, or you are on automatic pilot. In the following example, the client, a 33-year-old married woman, is struggling with perfectionism both at work and at home:

CLIENT (hesitatingly): I don't know whether I can "kick the habit" . . . you know, just let some trivial things go at work and at home. I know I've made a contract with myself. I'm not sure that I can keep it.

HELPER: Huh. [The helper utters this briefly and then remains silent.]

CLIENT (laughs): Here I am deep into perfectionism and I hear myself saying that I can't do something! How ironic. Of course, I can. I mean it's not going to be easy . . . at least at first.

The helper's "huh" prompts the client to reconsider what she has just said. Prompts should never be the main course. They are part of the therapeutic dialogue only as a condiment.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF PROBES

Probes, used judiciously, help clients name, take notice of, explore, clarify, or further define any issue at any stage or step of the helping process. Designed to provide clarity and move things forward, probes can take different forms:

Statements. One form of probe is a statement indicating the need for further clarity. For instance, a helper, talking to a client who is having problems with his 25-year-old daughter who is still living at home, says: "It's still not clear to me whether you want to challenge her to leave the nest or not." The client replies, "Well, I want to, but I don't know how to do it without alienating her. I don't want it to sound like I don't care about her and that I'm just trying to get rid of her." Probes in the form of statements often take the form of the helper's confessing that he or she is in the dark in some way: "I'm not sure I understand how you intend . . ." or "I guess I'm still confused about. . ." This kind of request, putting the burden on the helper, has the advantage of not accusing clients of failing to cough up the truth.

Requests. Probes can take the form of direct requests for further information or more clarity. A counselor, talking to a woman living with her husband and her mother-in-law, says, "Tell me what you mean when you say that three's a crowd at home." She answers, "I get along fine with my husband, I get along fine with my mother-in-law. But the chemistry among the *three* of us is very unsettling." Obviously, requests should not sound like commands. "Come on, just tell me what you are thinking." Tone of voice and other paralinguistic and nonverbal cues help to soften requests.

Questions. Direct questions are perhaps the most common type of probe: "How do you react when he flies off the handle?" "What keeps you from making a decision?" "Now that the indirect approach to letting him know your needs is not working, what might Plan B look like?" Consider this case: A client has come for help in controlling her anger. With the help of a counselor she comes up with a solid program. In the next session, the client gives signs of backtracking. The counselor says, "You seemed enthusiastic about the program last week. But now, unless I'm mistaken, I hear a bit of hesitancy in your voice. What obstacles do you see standing in your way?" The client responds, "Well, after taking a second look at the program, I'm afraid it will make me look like a wimp. My fellow workers could get the wrong idea and begin pushing me around." The counselor says, "So there's something about yourself you don't want to lose. What might that be?" The client hesitates for a moment and then says, "Spunk!" The counselor replies, "Well, let's see how you can keep your spunk and still get rid of the outbursts that get you in trouble." They go on to discuss the difference between assertiveness and aggression.

Words or phrases that are, in effect, questions or requests. Sometimes single words or simple phrases are, in effect, probes. A client talking about a difficult relationship with her sister at one juncture says, "I really hate her." The helper responds simply and unemotionally, "Hate." The client responds, "Well, I know that hate is too strong a term. What I mean is that things are getting worse and worse." Another client, troubled with irrational fears, says, "I've had it. I just can't go on

like this. No matter what, I'm going to move forward." The counselor replies, "Move forward to . . . ?" The client says, "Well . . . to not indulging myself with my fears. That's what they are, a form of self-indulgence. From our talks, I've learned that it's a bad habit. A very bad habit." They go on to discuss ways of controlling such thoughts.

Whatever form probes take, they are often, directly or indirectly, questions of some sort. Therefore, a word about the use of questions is in order.

USING QUESTIONS EFFECTIVELY

Helpers, especially novices and inept counselors, tend to ask too many questions. When in doubt about what to say or do, they ask questions that add no value. It is as if gathering information were the goal of the helping interview. Social intelligence calls for restraint. When judiciously used, however, questions can be an important part of your interactions with clients. Here are two guidelines.

Ask a limited number of questions. When clients are asked too many questions, they feel grilled, and that does little for the helping relationship. Furthermore, many clients instinctively know when questions are just filler, used because the helper does not have anything better to say. I have caught myself asking questions the answers to which I didn't even want to know. Let's assume that the helper working with Robin, the young woman exploring her concerns about her looks and body image discussed in Chapter 6, asks her a whole series of questions:

"When did you first feel like this?"

"Have you discussed this with anyone?"

"What do you do to improve your looks?"

"What is it about your looks that you think others don't like?"

Robin would have every right to say, "Good-bye, no thanks" in response to these intrusions. Such questions constitute a random search for information that is of little value. Helping sessions were never meant to be question-and-answer sessions that go nowhere.

Ask open-ended questions. As a general rule, ask open-ended questions—that is, questions that require more than a simple yes or no or similar one-word answer. Not, "Now that you've decided to take early retirement, do you have any plans?" but, "Now that you've decided to take early retirement, what are your plans?" Counselors who ask closed questions find themselves asking more and more questions. One closed question begets another. Of course, when a specific piece of information is needed, then a closed question may be called for. A career counselor might ask, "How many jobs have you had in the past two years?" The information is relevant to helping the client draw up a resumé and a job-search strategy. And occasionally, a sharp closed question can have the right impact. For instance, when a client finishes outlining what he is going to do to get back at his "ungrateful" son, the counselor asks, "Is that what you really want?" In moderation, open-ended questions at every stage and step of the helping process help clients fill in what is missing.

PRINCIPLES IN THE USE OF PROBES

Here, then, are some principles that can guide you in the use of all probes, whatever form they may take.

Use probes to help clients engage as fully as possible in the therapeutic dialogue. As noted earlier, many clients do not have the all the communication skills needed to engage in the problem-managing and opportunity-developing dialogue. However, if you have these skills, you can use them to help your clients "play"—that is, engage in the kind of turn taking, connecting, mutual influence, and co-creation of outcomes that characterize dialogue. Probes are the principal tools needed to help all clients engage in the give-and-take of the helping process. The following exchange is between a counselor at a church parish center and a parishioner who has been struggling to tell her story about her attempts to get her insurance company to respond to the claim she filed after a car accident:

CLIENT: They just won't do anything. I call and get the cold shoulder. They ignore me, and I don't like it!

HELPER: You're angry with the way you're being treated. And you want to get to the bottom of it. . . . Give me a brief overview of what you've done so far.

CLIENT: Well, they sent me forms that I didn't understand very well. I did the best I could. I think they were trying to show that it was my fault. I even kept copies. I've got them with me.

HELPER: You're not sure you can trust them. . . . I'd like to take a look at your copies of the forms.

The forms turn out to be standard claim forms. Given that this is the client's first encounter with an insurance company and that she has poor communication skills, the counselor gains some insight into what the phone conversations between her and the insurance company must be like. By sharing highlights and using probes, the counselor gets her to see that her experience might well be normal. The outcome is that the client gets help from someone in the parish who has gone through a similar experience.

Helping clients engage in dialogue is not some form of manipulation. You can encourage dialogue without in any way being patronizing or condescending. This is a robust use of probes, often very useful in interacting with nonassertive and reluctant clients. You can't force your clients to do anything, but your invitations can be strong. Social intelligence will tell you how far you can go.

Use probes to help clients achieve concreteness and clarity. Probes can help clients turn what is abstract and vague into something concrete and clear—something you can get your hands on and work with. In the next example, a man is talking about an intimate relationship that has turned sour:

CLIENT: She treats me badly, and I don't like it!

HELPER: Tell me what she actually does.

CLIENT: She talks about me behind my back. I know she does. Others tell me what she says. She also cancels dates when something more interesting comes up.

HELPER: That's pretty demeaning. . . . How have you been reacting to all this?

CLIENT: Well, I think she knows that I know. But we haven't talked about it much.

In this example, the helper's probe leads to a clearer statement of the client's experience and behavior. By sharing highlights and using probes, the helper discovers that the client puts up with a great deal because he is afraid of losing her. He goes on to help the client deal with the psychological "economics" of such a one-sided relationship.

In the next example, a man who is dissatisfied with living a somewhat impoverished social life is telling his story. A simple probe leads to a significant revelation.

CLIENT: I do funny things that make me feel good.

HELPER: What kinds of things?

CLIENT: Well, I daydream about being a hero, a kind of tragic hero. In my daydreams, I save the lives of people I like but who don't seem to know I exist. And then they come running to me, but I turn my back on them. I choose to be alone. I come up with all sorts of variations of this theme.

HELPER: So in your daydreams, you play a character who wants to be liked or loved but who gets some kind of satisfaction from rejecting those who haven't loved him back. . . . I'm not sure I've got that right.

CLIENT: Well . . . yeah . . . I sort of contradict myself . . . I do want to be loved, but I don't do very much to get a real social life. It's all in my head.

The helper's probe leads to a clearer statement of the client's internal behaviors. Helping the client to explore his fantasy life could be a first step toward finding out what he really wants from relationships.

The next client has become the breadwinner since her husband suffered a stroke. Someone takes care of her husband during the day.

CLIENT: Since my husband had his stroke, coming home at night is rather difficult for me. I just . . . Well, I don't know.

HELPER: It really gets you down. . . . What's it like?

CLIENT: When I see him sitting immobile in the chair, I'm filled with pity for him. And the next thing I know, it's pity for myself, and it's mixed with anger or even rage. But I don't know what or whom to be angry at. I don't know how to focus my anger. Good God, he's only 42, and I'm only 40!

In this case, the helper's probe leads to a fuller description of the intensity of the client's feelings and emotions.

In each of these cases, the client's story gets more specific. Of course, the goal is not to get more and more detail. Rather, it is to get the kind of detail that makes the problem or unused opportunity clear enough to see what can be done about it.

Use probes to help clients complete the picture. Probes further the therapeutic dialogue by helping clients identify missing pieces of the puzzle—experiences, behaviors, and feelings that would help both clients and helpers get a better fix on problem situations, possibilities for a better future, or drawing up plans of action. The client in the following example is at odds with his wife over his mother-in-law's upcoming visit:

HELPER: I realize now that you often get angry when your mother-in-law stays for more than a day. But I'm still not sure what she does that makes you angry.

CLIENT: First of all, she throws our household schedule out and puts in her own. Then she provides a steady stream of advice on how to raise the kids. My wife sees this as an "inconvenience." For me it's a total family disruption. When she leaves, there's a lot of emotional cleaning up to be done.

Just what the client's mother-in-law does to get him going has been missing. Once the behavior has been spelled out in some detail, it is easier to help him come up with some remedies. Still missing, however, is what he does as a result of his mother-in-law's behavior. The helper continues:

HELPER: So when she takes over, everything gets turned upside down. . . . How do you react in the face of all this turmoil?

CLIENT: Well . . . well . . . I guess I go silent. Or I just get out of there, go somewhere, and fume. After she's gone, I take it out on my wife, who still doesn't see what all the fuss is about.

So now it's clear that the client does little to change things. It is also obvious that he is a little taken aback by being asked how he handles the situation.

In the next example, a divorced woman is talking about the turmoil that takes place when her ex-husband visits the children. It has some similarities with the case we've just seen.

HELPER: The Sundays your ex-husband exercises his visiting rights with the children end in his taking verbal potshots at you, and you get these headaches. I've got a fairly clear picture of what he does when he comes over, but it might help if you could describe what you do.

CLIENT: Well, I do nothing.

HELPER: So last Sunday he just began letting you have it for no particular reason. Or just to make you feel bad.

CLIENT: Well . . . not exactly. I asked him about increasing the amount of the child support payments. And I asked him why he's dragging his feet about getting a better job. He's so stupid. He can't even take a bit of sound advice.

Through probes, the counselor helps the client fill in a missing part of the picture—her own behavior. She keeps describing herself as total victim and her ex-husband as total aggressor. But that doesn't seem to be the full story.

Next we have Iolanda, a mother of four kids, two of whom are in their early teens, talking to a friend, Vivian, who does a lot of volunteer work at a community social center. Her complaint is that her husband and kids don't provide much help in getting household chores done. Vivian has a lot of social savvy.

IOLANDA (in a matter-of-fact voice): At the end of the day, what with the kids and dinner and cleaning up, I'm not at my best.

VIVIAN: When you ask for help, how do they respond?

IOLANDA: I shouldn't have to ask! They can see what needs to be done.

VIVIAN: It sounds like some bad habits are in place. . . . If yours were the ideal household, what would be happening? What would the division of labor look like?

IOLANDA: Hmm. . . . Well, first of all . . .

Her friend realizes that the "family culture" is probably filled with bad habits. Her probe indicates that the mother resents having to ask for help. So she uses another probe to put the conversation on a different tack—looking at possibilities for a better future rather than digging deeper into the problem situation itself. Her strategy is to help Iolanda determine what she wants and then help her see what needs to be done to get it.

Use probes to help clients get a balanced view of problem situations and opportunities. Clients, in their eagerness to discuss issues or make points, often describe one side of a picture or one viewpoint. Probes can be used to help them fill out the picture. In the following example, the client—a manager who has to work with a bright, highly ambitious, aggressive young woman who plays politics to further her own interests—has been agonizing over his plight:

COUNSELOR: I've been wondering whether you see any upside to this, any hidden opportunities.

CLIENT: I'm not sure what you mean. It's just a disaster.

COUNSELOR: Well, you strike me as a pretty bright guy. I'm wondering if there are any lessons for you hidden in all this.

CLIENT (pausing): Oh, well, you know I tend to ignore politics around here, but now it's in my face. Where there are people, there are politics. I think she's being political to serve her own career. But I don't want to play her game. There must be some other kind of game or something that would let me keep my integrity. The days of avoiding all of this are probably over.

The problem situation has a flip side. It is an opportunity for rethinking and learning. As such, problems are incentives for constructive change. The client can learn something from all this. It's an opportunity to come to grips with the male-female dynamics of the workplace and a chance to explore "positive" political skills.

Use probes to help clients move into more beneficial stages and steps of the helping process. Probes can be used to open up new areas for discussion. They can be used to help clients engage in dialogue about any part of the helping process—telling their stories more fully, attacking blind spots, setting goals, formulating action strategies, discussing obstacles to action, and reviewing actions taken. Many clients do not easily move into whatever stage or step of the helping process might be most useful for them. Probes can help them do so. In the following example, the counselor uses a probe to help a middle-aged couple—Sean and Fiona, who have been complaining about each other—move on to the Stages II and III. Besides complaining, they have talked vaguely about "reinventing" their marriage. Part of this reinvention might focus on doing more things in common.

COUNSELOR: What kinds of things do you like doing together? What are some possibilities?

FIONA: I can think of something, though it might sound stupid to you (she says in an aside to her husband). We both like doing things for others, you know, caring about other people. Before we were married we talked about spending some time in the Peace Corps together, though it never happened.

SEAN: I wish we had. . . . But those days are past.

COUNSELOR: Are they? The Peace Corps may not be an option, but there must be other possibilities. (Neither Fiona nor Sean says anything.) I tell you what. Here are a couple of pieces of paper. Jot down three ways of helping others. Do your own list. Forget what your partner might think.

The counselor uses probes to get Sean and Fiona to brainstorm possibilities for some kind of service to others. He turns it into a written exercise. This gets them away from what was proving to be a tortuous process of problem exploration and moves them toward opportunity development.

The next client has been talking endlessly about the affair her husband is having. He knows that she knows.

COUNSELOR: You've said you're not going to do anything about it because it might hurt your son. But doing nothing is not the only possible option. Let's just name some others. Who knows? We might find a gem.

CLIENT: Hmm. . . . I'm not sure I know.

COUNSELOR: Well, you know people in the same predicament. You've read novels, seen movies. What are some of the standard things people do? I'm not saying do them. Let's just review them.

CLIENT: Hmm. . . . Well, I knew someone who did an outrageous thing. She knew her daughter knew. So one night at dinner she just said, "Let's all talk about the affair you're having and how to handle it. It's certainly not news to any of us."

COUNSELOR: All right, that's one way. Let's hear some more.

The client's current way of handling the affair is just one way. In their discussion, she says that she's pretty sure her son knows. So they also explore possibilities based on the assumption that he does know.

In the following example, Jill, the helper, and Justin, the client, have been discussing how Justin is letting his impairment—he has lost a leg in a car accident—get in the way of his picking up his life again. The session has bogged down a bit.

JILL: Let's try a bit of drama. I'm going to be Justin for a while. You're going to be Jill. As my counselor, ask me some questions that you think might make a difference for me . . . that is, Justin.

JUSTIN (pausing a long time): I'm not much of an actor, but here goes. . . . Why are you taking the coward's way out? Why are you on the verge of giving up? [His eyes tear up.]

Jill gets Justin to formulate the probes. It's her way of asking Justin to "move forward" and take responsibility for his part of the session. Justin's "probes" turn out to be challenges, almost accusations, certainly much stronger than anything Jill, at this stage, would have tried. However painful this is for Justin, it's a breakthrough.

In the following example, George, a single man in his sixties, is seeing a counselor to deal with the anxiety he is experiencing after an unexpected ten-day stay in the hospital for an intestinal disorder. George is a hardworking, very independent man. The counselor would like him to use his illness as time-out to reflect on his current lifestyle. The illness and the subsequent anxiety could be used as a springboard for creating a different way of living that would include a less haphazard social life. Developing a better social system could help him deal with the natural and inevitable ups and downs of growing older.

HELPER: George, describe to me the current balance between your work life and your leisure and social life.

GEORGE (pausing): I never stop to think about it. . . . Leisure and social life are things that get shoe-horned into my work schedule. On paper it all looks terribly unbalanced, but that's not how I feel. . . . Except. . . .

HELPER: Except?

CLIENT: A lot of times, when I finish a project and am looking for something to do with my friends, I realize that I do everything by appointment. . . . A social life by appointment. That doesn't sound very balanced . . . even to me.

The helper's probe around work-social-life balance has the impact of a "What's going on?" probe. George says, in effect, "Maybe I should take a more serious look at this."

Use probes to help clients move forward within some step of the helping process. Probes can be used not only to help clients move to a different stage or step but also to move within a step. Contrast the two following approaches to probing. The client, a woman in the middle of an acrimonious divorce, has recently learned that her breast cancer has reappeared. She is seeing the counselor after a long interlude.

CLIENT (toward the end of the session): Well, now we're up-to-date. You know the full miserable story.

COUNSELOR A: I haven't seen you for a while. When did you find out about the reappearance of the cancer?

CLIENT: Let's see. . . . Oh, who knows and who cares! . . . Well, I have to go.

The probe is a useless one, mere filler. It does nothing but annoy the client. Let's replay the scene with another counselor.

COUNSELOR B: I haven't seen you for a while. I've been wondering whether the reappearance of the cancer has altered your thinking about the divorce in any way.

CLIENT: Only in one way. If I die, I don't want to die married to him. I just don't. It would be dishonest. Our relationship, as you know, died a long time ago.

COUNSELOR B: So you're sticking to your guns. In fact, finding out about the cancer has increased your resolve. . . . But the divorce proceedings up to now have been pretty bitter for you. I'm wondering how going through divorce proceedings fits in with your resolve to be kinder to yourself.

CLIENT: Hmm. . . . The divorce is driving me into the ground. . . . I tell you what. Caving in is off limits. Trade-offs . . . well, that's a different story. Let's talk about trade-offs the next time we meet. I have to think about it.

The helper probes to see whether her decision to pursue the divorce (a Stage II activity) is irrevocable. She's not going to "cave in." But there might be some trade-offs on the way she pursues the divorce that might spare her much needless pain.

Use probes to explore and clarify clients' points of view, decisions, and proposals. Clients often fail to clarify their points of view, decisions, and intentions or proposals. For instance, the decision itself might be unclear, and the reason behind it and the implications for the client and others are not spelled out. In the following case, the client, driving under the influence, has had a bad automobile accident. Luckily, he was the only one hurt. He is recovering physically, but his psychological recovery has been slow. The accident opened up a Pandora's box of psychological problems—not the least of which is a lack of self-responsibility—that had been waiting to pop out. A counselor is helping him work through some of the key problems. Here is part of an early session.

CLIENT: I don't think that the laws around driving under the influence should be as tough as they are. I'm scared to death of what might happen to me if I ever had an accident again.

COUNSELOR: So you feel you're in jeopardy. . . . What makes you think that the laws are too tough?

CLIENT: Well, they bully us. One little mistake and bingo! Your freedom goes out the window. Laws should make people free.

COUNSELOR: Let's say all laws on driving under the influence were dropped. What then?

The counselor knows that the client is running away from taking responsibility for his actions. Using probes to get him to spell out the implications of his point of view on DUI laws and its implications is the beginning of an attempt to help the client face up to himself.

In a later session, the client talks about the legal ramifications of the accident. He has to go to court.

CLIENT: I've been thinking about this. I'm going to get me a really good lawyer and fight this thing. I talked with a friend, and he thinks he knows someone who can get me off. I need a break. It might cost me a bundle. After all, I messed up someone's property a bit, but I didn't hurt anyone.

COUNSELOR: What's the best thing that could happen in court?

CLIENT: I'd get off scot-free. Well, maybe a slap on the wrist of some kind. A warning.

COUNSELOR: And what's the worst thing that could happen?

CLIENT: I haven't given that a lot of thought. I don't really know much about the laws or the courts or how tough they might be. That sort of stuff. But with the right lawyer

COUNSELOR: Hmm. . . . I'm trying to put myself in your shoes. . . . I think I'd try to find out what the most likely deal in court might be before I made up my mind about lawyers and things. What do you think?

The counselor is using probes to help the client explore the implications of a decision he's making.

The state has very tough DUI laws. In the end the client, because of the alcohol level in his blood, has his license suspended for six months, is fined heavily, and has to spend a month in jail. All of this is very sobering. The counselor visits him in jail, and they talk about the future.

CLIENT: I feel like I've been hit by a train.

COUNSELOR: You had no idea that it would be this bad.

CLIENT: Right. No idea. . . . I know you tried to warn me in your own way, but I wasn't ready to listen. . . . Now I have to begin to put my life back together. Though I don't feel like it.

COUNSELOR: But now you've had the wake-up call, a horrible wake-up call. So what does the future hold . . . even if you don't feel up to looking at it?

CLIENT: I have been thinking. One thing I want to do is to make some sort of apology to my family. They're hurting as bad as I am. I feel so awkward. I know how to act in cocky mode. Humble mode I'm not used to. Do I write a long letter? Do I wait and just apologize through my actions? Do I take each one of them aside? I don't know, but I've just got to do it.

COUNSELOR: Somehow you have to make things right with them. Just how, well that's another matter. Maybe we could start by finding out what you want to accomplish through an apology, however it's done.

Here we find a much more sober and cooperative client. He proposes, roughly, a course of action. The counselor supports his need to move beyond past stupidities and present misery. It's about the future, not the past. The counselor's last statement is a probe aimed at giving substance and order to the client's proposal: "What do you want to accomplish?"

Use probes to challenge clients and help them challenge themselves. In the last chapter, we saw that sharing highlights can act as a mild form of social influence or challenge. We also saw that effective highlights often act as probes. That is, they can be indirect requests for further information or ways of steering a client toward a different stage or step of the helping process. And, as you have probably noticed in the examples used in this chapter, probes can have an edge of challenge in them. Many probes are not just requests for relevant information. They often place some kind of demand on the client to respond, reflect, review, or reevaluate. Such probes are challenges of one kind or another. Or at least they serve as a bridge between communicating understanding to clients and helping them challenge themselves. The following client, having committed himself to standing up to some of his mother's possessive ways, now shows signs of weakening in his resolve:

HELPER: The other day you talked of "having it out with her"—though that might be too strong a term. A little while ago you mentioned something about "being reasonable with her." Tell me how these two differ.

CLIENT (pausing): Well, I think you might be witnessing a case of cold feet. . . . She's a very strong woman.

The counselor helps the client revisit his decision to "get tough" with his mother and, if this is what he really wants, what he can do to strengthen his resolve. Using probes as mild forms of challenge is perfectly legitimate, provided you know what you are doing.

Probes can also be used to help clients remain focused on relevant and important issues. Some clients meander because that's their communication style. Probes help them stay focused. Other clients wander because the topic at hand is getting too uncomfortable. Probes are then gentle nudges to keep them focused on real issues. On the other hand, probes should not be ways of extorting from clients things they don't want to give. Statements that have the flavor of "Oh, come on, tell me! It's really not going to hurt" move into dangerous territory. High-quality probes increase rather than decrease the client's sense of self-responsibility. Challenge and the wisdom that should permeate it are discussed in Chapters 10, 11, and 12.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SHARING HIGHLIGHTS AND USING PROBES

The trouble with dealing with skills one at a time is that each skill is taken out of context. In the give-and-take of any helping session, however, a helper must intermingle the skills in a natural way. In actual sessions, skilled helpers continually tune in, listen actively, and use a mix of probes and empathy to help clients clarify and come to grips with their concerns, deal with blind spots, set goals, make plans, and get things done. There is no formula for the right mix; it depends on the

client, client needs, the problem situation, possible opportunities, the stage, and the step.

A word about the relationship between sharing highlights and using probes. Here is a basic guideline: After using a probe to which a client responds, share a highlight that expresses and checks your understanding. Be hesitant to follow one probe with another. The logic of this is straightforward. First, if a probe is effective, it will yield information that needs to be listened to and understood. Second, a shared highlight, if accurate, tends to place a demand on the client to explore further. It puts the ball back in the client's court. Years ago during a seminar Bob Carkhuff suggested, with his usual edge, that if helpers find themselves asking two questions in a row, they may just have asked two stupid questions.

In the following example, the client is a young Chinese American woman whose father died in China and whose mother is now dying in the United States. She has been talking about the traditional obedience of Chinese women and her fears of slipping into a form of passivity in her American life. She talks about her sister, who gives everything to her husband without looking for anything in return. The first counselor sticks to probes.

COUNSELOR: To what degree is this self-effacing role rooted in your culture?

CLIENT: Well, being somewhat self-effacing is certainly in my cultural genes. And yet I look around and see many of my North American counterparts adopt a different style . . . a style that frankly appeals to me. But last year, when I took a trip back to China with my mother to meet my half sisters, the moment I landed I wasn't American. I was totally Chinese again.

COUNSELOR A: What did you learn there?

CLIENT: That I am Chinese!

The client says something significant about herself, but instead of responding with understanding, the helper uses another probe. This elicits only a repetition, with some annoyance, of what she had just said. Now a different approach:

COUNSELOR B: You learned just how deep your cultural roots go.

CLIENT: And if these roots are so deep, what does that mean for me here? I love my Chinese culture. I want to be Chinese and American at the same time. How to do that . . . well, I haven't figured that out yet. I thought I had, but I haven't.

In this case, an empathic highlight works much more effectively than another probe. Counselor B helps the client move forward.

In the next example, a single middle-aged woman working in a company that has reinvented itself for the so-called new economy still has a job, but the pay is much less and she is doing work she does not enjoy. She does not have the computer and Internet-related skills for the better jobs. She feels both stressed and depressed.

CLIENT: Well, I suppose that I should be grateful for even having a job. But now I work longer hours for less pay. And I'm doing stuff I don't even like. My life is no longer mine!

HELPER: So the extra pressure and stress make you wonder just how "grateful" you should feel.

CLIENT: Precisely. And the future looks pretty bleak.

HELPER: What could you change in the short term to make things more bearable?

CLIENT: Hmm. . . . Well, I know one way. We all keep complaining to one another at work. And this seems to make things even worse. I can get out of that loop. It's a simple way of making life a bit less miserable.

HELPER: So one way is to stop contributing to your own misery by staying away from the complaining chorus. . . . What might you start doing?

CLIENT: Well, there's no use sitting around hoping that what has happened is going to be reversed. I've been really jolted out of my complacency. I assumed with the economy humming and unemployment so low I'd just motor on as usual. But I'm still young enough to acquire some more skills. And I do have some skills that I haven't needed to use before. I'm a good communicator and I've got a lot of common sense. I work well with people. There are probably lots of jobs around here that require those skills.

HELPER: So, given the wake-up call, you think it might be possible to take unused skills and reposition yourself at work. And, of course, you could develop some technology skills.

CLIENT: Repositioning. Hmm, I like that word. It makes a lot of pictures dance through my mind. . . . Yes, I need to reposition myself. For instance . . .

This combination of highlights and probing gets things moving. Instead of focusing on the misery of the present situation, the client names a few possibilities for a better future—a Stage II activity. Box 7-1 summarizes the main points about the use of probes.

On the other hand, you should be careful not to become either an empathic highlight "machine," grinding out one highlight after another, or an "interrogator," peppering your clients continually with needless probes. All responses to clients, including probes and challenges, are empathic if they are based on solid understanding of clients' core messages and points of view. All responses that build on and add to clients' remarks are implicitly empathic. Since these responses are empathic in effect, they cut down on the need for a steady stream of highlights.

THE ART OF SUMMARIZING: PROVIDING FOCUS AND DIRECTION

The communication skills of visibly tuning in, listening, sharing highlights, and probing need to be orchestrated in such a way that they help clients focus their attention on issues that make a difference. The ability to summarize and help clients summarize the main points of a helping interchange or session is a skill that can be used to provide both focus and challenge.

Brammer (1973) lists a number of goals that can be achieved by judicious use of summarizing: "warming up" the client, focusing scattered thoughts and feelings, bringing the discussion of a particular theme to a close, and prompting the client to explore a theme more thoroughly. There are certain times when summaries prove particularly useful: at the beginning of a new session, when a session seems to be going nowhere, and when a client gets stuck.

At the beginning of a new session. When a summary is used at the beginning of a new session, especially when a client seems uncertain about how to begin, it prevents the client from merely repeating what has already been said before. It puts the client under pressure to move on. Consider this example: Liz, a social worker, begins a session with a rather overly talkative man with a summary of the main points



Box 7-1 Suggestions for the Use of Probes

1. Keep in mind the goals of probing:
 - To help clients engage as fully as possible in the therapeutic dialogue.
 - To help nonassertive or reluctant clients tell their stories and engage in other behaviors related to managing their problems and developing their opportunities.
 - To help clients identify experiences, behaviors, and feelings that give focus to their stories.
 - To open up new areas for discussion.
 - To help clients explore and clarify points of view, decisions, and proposals.
 - To help clients be as concrete and specific as possible.
 - To help clients remain focused on relevant and important issues.
 - To help clients move on to further stages or steps in the helping process.
 - To mildly challenge clients to examine the way they think, behave, and act both within helping sessions and in their daily lives as they try to manage problems and develop opportunities.
2. Make sure that probing is done in the spirit of empathy.
3. Use a mix of statements—open-ended questions, prompts, and requests—not questions alone.
4. Do not engage clients in question-and-answer sessions.
5. If a probe helps a client reveal relevant information, follow it up with an empathic highlight rather than another probe.
6. Use whatever judicious mixture of highlights and probing is needed to help clients clarify problems, identify blind spots, develop new scenarios, search for action strategies, formulate plans, and review outcomes of actions.

of the previous session. This serves several purposes: First, it shows the client that she had listened carefully to what he had said in the last session and that she had reflected on it after the session. Second, the summary gives the client a jumping-off point for the new session. It gives him an opportunity to add to or modify what was said. Finally, it places the responsibility for moving forward on the client. The implied sentiment of the summary is "Now where do you want to go with this?" Summaries put the ball in the clients' court and give them an opportunity to exercise initiative.

During a session that is going nowhere. A summary can give focus to a session that seems to be going nowhere. One of the main reasons sessions go nowhere is that helpers allow clients to keep "going 'round the mulberry bush"—that is, saying

the same things over and over again—instead of helping them either go more deeply into their stories, focus on possibilities and goals, or discuss strategies that will help clients get what they need and want. For instance, a counselor provides assistance to the staff of a shelter for the homeless. One of the staff members is showing signs of burnout. In a second meeting with the counselor, she keeps going over the same ground, talking endlessly about stressful incidents that have taken place over the last few months. At one point the counselor provides a summary.

COUNSELOR: Let's see if I can pull together what you've been saying. The work here, by its very nature, is stressful. You've mentioned a whole string of incidents such as being hit by someone you were trying to help and heated arguments with some of your coworkers. But I believe you've intimated that these are the kinds of things that happen in these places. Shelters are prone to them. They are part of the furniture. They're not going to stop. But they can be very punishing. At times, you wish you weren't here. But if they are not going to stop, maybe the next question is, "How do I cope with them? How do I do my work and get some ongoing satisfaction from it?"

The purpose of the summary is to help the client move beyond "poor me" and find ways of coping with this kind of work. The challenge in places like shelters is creating a supportive work environment, developing a sense of organizational and personal purpose, promoting the kind of teamwork that fits the institution's mission, and fostering a culture of coping strategies (see Brown & O'Brien, 1998).

When a client gets stuck. A summary can be used when a client doesn't seem to know where to go next, either in the helping session itself or in an action program out there in the real world. In such a case, the helper can, of course, use probes to help the client move on. A summary, however, has a way of keeping the ball in the client's court. Moreover, the helper does not always have to provide the summary. Often it is better to ask the client to pull together the major points. This helps the client own the helping process, pull together the salient points, and move on. Since this is not meant to be a way of testing the client, the counselor should offer the client help to stitch the summary together. Consider, for example, a client who has lost her job and her boyfriend because she has outbreaks of anger when she drinks. She has been talking about "not being able to stick to the program." The counselor asks her to summarize what she's been doing and the obstacles she has been running into. With the help of the counselor, she stumbles through a summary. At the end of it she says, "I guess it's clear to both of us that I haven't been doing a very good job sticking to the program. On paper, the 12 steps look like a snap. But it seems that I don't live on paper." The counselor now sees that it's time to go back to the drawing board on the action steps, what it takes to stick to the program, and how to cope with obstacles.

When a client needs a new perspective. Often when scattered elements are brought together, the client sees the "bigger picture" more clearly. In the following example, a man who has been reluctant to go to a counselor with his wife has, in a solo session with the counselor, agreed to a couple of sessions "to please her." In the session, he talks a great deal about his behavior at home, but in a rather disjointed way. Much of it is caring.

COUNSELOR: I'd like to pull a few things together. You've encouraged your wife in her career, especially when things are difficult for her at work. You also encourage her to spend time with her friends as a way of enjoying herself and letting off steam. You also make sure that you spend time with the kids. In fact, time with them is important for you.

CLIENT: Yeah. That's right.

COUNSELOR: Also, if I have heard you correctly, you currently take care of the household finances. You are usually the one who accepts or rejects social invitations, because your schedule is tighter than hers. And now you're about to ask her to move because you can get a better job in Boston.

CLIENT: When you put it all together like that, it sounds as if I'm running her life. . . . She never tells me I'm running her life.

COUNSELOR: Maybe we could talk a little about this when the three of us get together.

IGNATIUS: Hmm. . . . well, I'd . . . hmm . . . [laughs]. I'd better think about all of this before the next session.

The summary provides the client with a mild jolt. He realizes that he needs to face up to the "I am making all the big decisions for her" theme implied in the summary.

HOW TO BECOME PROFICIENT IN USING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Understanding communication skills and how they fit into the helping process is one thing. Becoming proficient in their use is another. Some trainees think that they can learn these "soft" skills easily and fail to put in the kind of hard work and practice needed to become "fluent" in them (Binder, 1990; Georges, 1988). Doing the exercises on communication skills in the manual that accompanies this book and practicing these skills in training groups can help, but that isn't enough to make the skills second nature. If you trot out your skills of tuning in, listening, processing, sharing highlights, and probing only for helping encounters your sessions are likely to have a hollow ring to them. You need to exercise these skills in all your relationships, making them part of your everyday communication style.

After providing some initial training in communication skills, I tell students, "Now, go out into your real lives and get good at these skills. I can't do that for you." In the beginning, it may be difficult to practice all these skills in everyday life, not because they are very difficult, but because they are relatively rare in conversations. Take sharing highlights. Listen to the conversations around you. If you were to use an unobtrusive counter, pressing the plunger every time you heard someone share an empathic highlight, you might go days without pressing the plunger. But you can make sharing highlights a reality in your everyday life. And those who interact with you will notice the difference. They probably will not call it empathy or sharing highlights. Rather, they will say such things as "She really listens to me" or "He takes me seriously."

On the other hand, you will hear many probes in everyday conversations. People are much more comfortable asking questions than providing understanding. However, many of these probes are aimless. Worse, many will be disguised criticisms: "Why on earth did you do that?" Learning how to integrate purposeful probes

with highlights demands practice in everyday life. Life is your lab. Every conversation is an opportunity.

I once ran a training program on these skills for a CPA firm. Although the director of training believed in their value in the business world, many of the account executives did not. They resisted the whole process. I got a call one day from one of the more notable resisters. "I owe you this call," he said. "Really?" I replied with an edge of doubt in my voice. "Really," he said. He went on to tell me how he had recently called on a potential client. This client, dissatisfied with its current audit firm, was interviewing for a new one. During the interview, he said to himself, "Since we don't have the slightest chance of getting this account, why don't I amuse myself by trying these communication skills?" In his phone call to me, he went on to say, "This morning I got a call from that client. He gave us the account, but in doing so he said, 'You're not getting the account because you were the low bidder. You were not. You're getting the account because we thought that you were the only one that really understood our needs.' So, almost literally, I owe you this call." I forgot to ask him for a share of the fee.

SHADOW-SIDE REALITIES OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Some helpers tend to overidentify the helping process with the communication skills—that is, with the tools that serve it. This is true not only of tuning in, listening, processing, sharing highlights, and probing but also of the skills of challenging that are the focus of Chapters 10, 11, and 12. Being good at communication skills is not the same as being good at helping. Moreover, an overemphasis on communication skills can turn helping into a great deal of talk with very little action, and few outcomes.

Communication skills are essential, of course, but they still must serve both the process and the outcomes of helping. These skills certainly help you establish a good relationship with clients. And a good relationship is the basis for the kind of social-emotional reeducation that has been outlined earlier. But you can be good at communication, good at relationship building, even good at social-emotional reeducation and still shortchange your clients, because they need more. Some helpers who overestimate the value of communication skills tend to see a skill such as sharing highlights as some kind of "magic bullet." Others overestimate the value of information gathering. This is not a broad indictment of the profession. Rather, it is a caution for beginners.

On the other hand, some practitioners underestimate the need for solid communication skills. There is a subtle assumption that the "technology" of their approach, such as manualized treatments, is sufficient. They listen and respond through their theories and constructs rather than through their humanity. They become technologists instead of helpers. They are like some medical doctors who become more and more proficient in the use of medical technology and less and less in touch with the humanity of their patients. Some years ago, I spent ten days in a hospital (an eternity in these days of managed care). The staff were magnificent in addressing my medical needs. But no one ever addressed the psychological needs

that sprang from my anxiety about my illness. Unfortunately, my anxieties were often expressed through physical symptoms. Then those symptoms were treated medically. I asked, "When you have conferences during which patients are discussed, do you say, 'Well, we've thoroughly reviewed his medical status and needs. Now let's turn our attention to what he's going through. What can we do to help him through this experience?'" One resident said, "No, we don't have time." Don't get me wrong. These were dedicated, generous people who had my interests at heart. But they ignored many of my needs. We have a long way to go.

STAGE I OF THE HELPING MODEL AND ADVANCED COMMUNICATION SKILLS



The basic communication skills reviewed in Part Two are critical tools. With them, you can help clients engage in all the stages and steps of the helping model. But those communication skills are not the helping process itself. Part Three is a detailed exposition and illustration of Stage I of the helping model, together with its three steps. Step I-A, helping clients tell their stories, is discussed in Chapter 8. Chapter 9 deals with reluctant and resistant clients. Step I-B focuses on advanced communication skills—those related to helping clients challenge themselves. These skills are discussed and illustrated in Chapters 10, 11, and 12. Step I-C introduces the concept of leverage—helping clients choose the right issues to work on—which is the focus of Chapter 13.