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Types of communication skills in mental health

Do you ever find yourself listening to someone, but focusing more on what you want to say next? Maybe they're telling you about their weekend, when you think: "Wow, I can't wait to tell them about what happened to me last Saturday. What a story!" Or maybe you have the opposite problem: You keep it all in. You wouldn't want to bother someone else, or hurt their feelings. Maybe it's easier for you to avoid conflict by hiding your feelings when you're upset. Most of us are guilty of these mistakes. In fact, these communication errors are such a normal part of life, that most of us don't even notice when we're guilty of them. Usually they aren't such a big deal. We move on with the conversation and that's that. However, the consequences of poor communication take a toll. Feeling unheard can lead to resentment, frustration, and pain. With practice, you'll learn to communicate more effectively by spotting common errors, and learning techniques to both hear and be heard. Even if you aren't having relational issues, learning to communicate effectively can improve almost every facet of life.



Larry I. Baker reports in *Listening Behaviors* that 70-75% of a person's working day is spent in the communication.

LISTENING SKILLS

According to Dumont and Lennon, "Listening is the complex process of receiving, focusing, deciphering, accepting and storing."



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Communication time spent on an average by a person **in a day**.

- ✓ 45% is listening
- ✓ 30% is talking
- ✓ 16% is reading,
- ✓ 09% is writing

Reading and writing come later in the hierarchy of developing language skills.





PURPOSE OF LISTENING

- ✓ Engage in social rituals
- ✓ To exchange information
- ✓ To exert control
- ✓ To share feelings.
- ✓ To enjoy yourself.

TYPES OF LISTENING

ACTIVE LISTENING
Active listening is the process of understanding fully what the speaker has said both in content and in feeling.

PASSIVE LISTENING
Listening without talking and without directing the speaker in any non-verbal way is known as passive listening.

TECHNIQUES FOR EFFECTIVE LISTENING



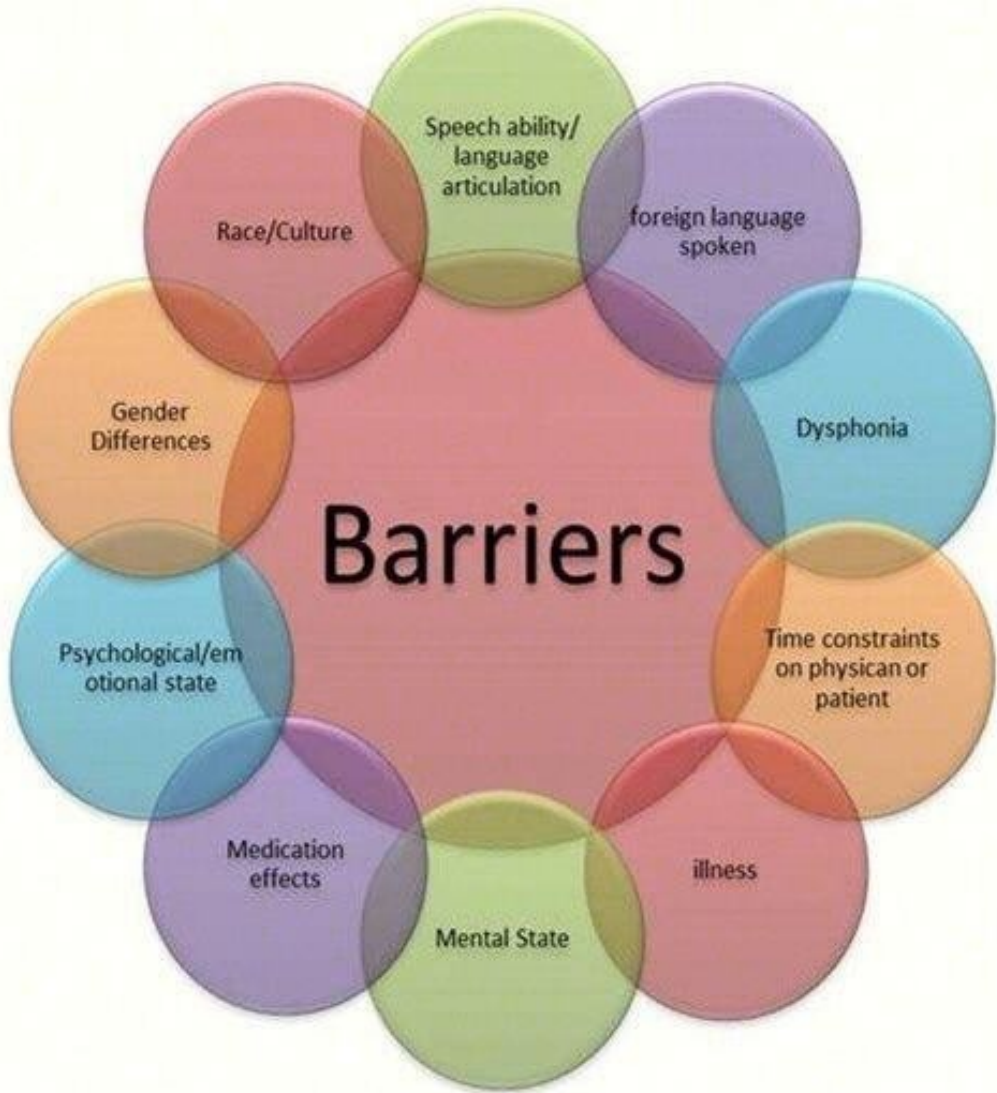
1. Focus your attention
2. Listen to understand not refute
3. Fight Distractions
4. Don't Interrupt
5. Maintain Eye Contact
6. Be Positive
7. Ask Questions
8. Take Notes
9. Provide Feedback
10. Summarize & Evaluate

WHY LISTENING?

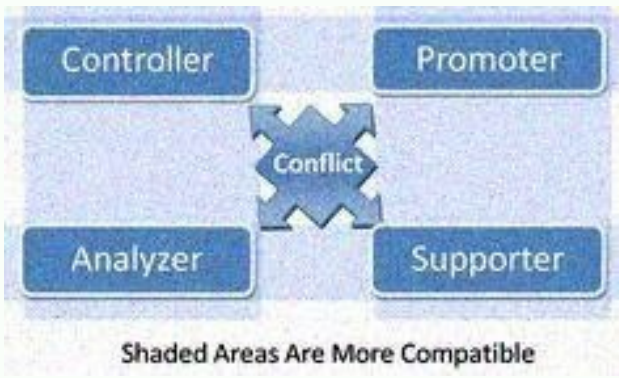
- ✓ To gain new information & ideas
- ✓ To test evidence
- ✓ To be inspired
- ✓ To improve your own communication.

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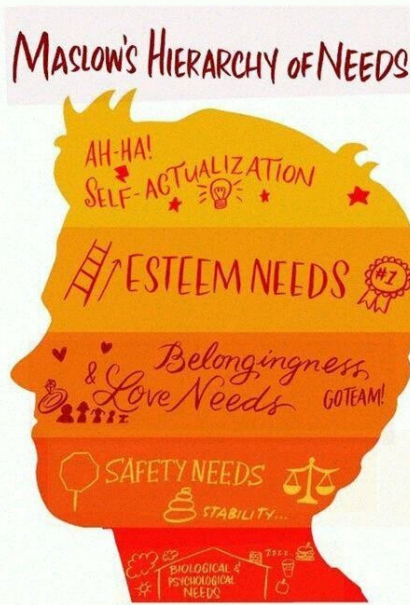
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This guide will be organized into several techniques that will help you hear and be heard. Try to think of these techniques as training wheels. They'll help you work toward the ultimate goal of communicating in an open, honest, and fair manner. You will probably start by using these skills in a more formal manner, but with enough practice, they'll become a natural part of how you communicate. Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Communication Passive, aggressive, and assertive communication refers to three styles of interaction. Everyone has the capability to use all three styles, and everyone uses them all at least occasionally. For example, someone might act passively with their boss, and assertively with their partner. You can probably picture examples of each communication style just based off of their names. During passive communication, you put the needs and desires of others first while neglecting yourself. Aggressive communication is just the opposite: You concern yourself only with your own needs at the detriment of others. Both of these styles can occasionally be appropriate, but are typically ineffective. Assertiveness refers to healthy balance between passive and aggressive communication. vevopije You clearly state your own needs, and you advocate to have them met. However, you listen to, acknowledge, and respect the needs of others. This means finding compromise. yevawikewasusa The following chart depicts some of the differences between each style. Beginning to use an assertive communication style will be a challenge if you haven't used it often in the past. Try using therapy sessions to practice. Your therapist can help by providing a safe place to practice a communication style you aren't entirely comfortable with. If it's difficult to start, or you feel uncomfortable roleplaying, just practice coming up with what an appropriate response to a situation might be. 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Make an effort to use good eye contact. Don't stare, but don't look at your feet either Use good posture. Keep your back straight and imagine your head reaching toward the sky. Avoid ambiguity. If you aren't comfortable with something, don't say: "Hmm, I don't know about that... maybe?" Instead, say: "Sorry, I'm not comfortable doing that." No swearing, no criticism (unless it's legitimately constructive), and no mocking. Be careful, you can come across as mocking or critical based solely upon the tone of your voice. Control the tone of your voice. Talking too loudly or too quietly are both a problem. Yelling feels aggressive, and whispering is like a big sign that says "I'm unsure about what I'm saying." During sensitive conversations it can be easy to unintentionally place blame, or to feel blamed. The goal of these conversations isn't to make the other person feel bad, but to resolve a problem. Feelings of blame quickly derail a conversation away from its original intention, and turn it into an unproductive argument. Using "I" statements will reduce the likelihood that you come across as blaming during sensitive conversations. Additionally, "I" statements are a good way to practice speaking assertively because you will be forced to take responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings. An "I" statement should usually be formatted like this: "I feel _____ when you ____." For example, you might say: "I feel worried when you don't tell me you'll be getting home late." Alternatively, if you weren't using an "I" statement, it might come out more like: "You can't just come home late without telling me. It worries me." Using an "I" statement serves several purposes in this example. First of all, the "I" statement will be interpreted by most people as less accusatory.

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Don't make the mistake of using the "I" statement as a license to say anything that's on your mind. Of course, you still have to be tactful, polite, and reasonable. Saying "I feel upset when you act so stupid" still isn't going to go over well. Reflections The ability to express your own ideas effectively is only half of what it takes to be a good communicator. Listening is the second half. This doesn't mean simply hearing words. It means hearing, thinking, interpreting, and striving to understand.

If you're thinking about the next thing you want to say, you aren't really listening. You're just hearing. Using a technique called reflection can quickly help you become a better listener. When reflecting, you will repeat back what someone has just said to you in your own words. Take this exchange for example: Speaker: "I've been feeling really stressed about work, and then when I get home I'm still in a bad mood." Listener: "Work has been so stressful that it causes you to feel frustrated all the time." The benefits of reflections aren't obvious on the surface, but reflections are one of the most powerful communication tools available. Those who haven't used reflections fear that it'll seem like they're just parroting the other person without contributing to the conversation.

However, reflections typically result in a positive response. So, what do reflections actually do? They act as confirmation that you heard, and understand, what the other person has said. Reflections validate the person's feelings by showing that you get it. It might seem like a reflection would kill a conversation-there's no new question to answer. Surprisingly, the opposite is usually true. Reflections encourage more sharing, because the person that you are listening to feels that you are listening to them. Try this example conversation: Speaker: "I get so angry when you spend so much money without telling me. We're trying to save for a house!" Listener: "We're working hard to save for a house, so it's really frustrating when it seems like I don't care."

Speaker: "Yeah, pretty much..." It makes me feel like you don't care about the house or our future." Listener: "It worries you because it makes you think I don't care about our relationship as much as you do." Speaker: "Well, I know that you do care, but I still get worried sometimes." You may have noticed that in this example the listener makes small interpretations about what the speaker really means. In the last reflection, the interpretation wasn't entirely correct. That's OK! The speaker sees that the listener is trying to understand, and corrects the small misunderstanding. This is exactly why reflections are so valuable. Reflections aren't just some exercise to practice in a therapy session—they're a great technique to use at any time. As you first begin to practice it's typical for reflections to feel a bit forced. But if you implement reflections well, they'll quickly start to feel natural once you see how positive the responses are.

Try using a tone of voice somewhere in between a question and a statement. Think of it as if you are restating what the other person said, but you're seeking confirmation. Don't just reflect the words! If you pick up on emotion in the person's voice or body language, include that in your reflection. You will come across as parroting if you haven't adequately reflected the reflection. Rewording shows that you understand what the other person meant, and you aren't just repeating their words. If you're reflecting after the other person was speaking for a long time, don't feel like you have to restate everything.

Just reflect the main point. Focus on emotions as much as possible. Switch up your language, or you'll sound like a broken record. Here are some examples: "I hear you saying that..." "You feel..." "You're telling me that that..." "It sounds like you feel..." Learning to use reflections does take practice. In couples counseling, it can be useful to allow one partner to speak for about 30 seconds, and then ask the other to reflect. After the couple comes to an understanding, switch roles. Do this for several minutes. Oh, and start with less serious topics, at least in the beginning! When working with an individual, try using our Practice Reflections worksheet: Reflections Practice Sheet worksheet Other Communication Tips Ask open-ended questions to encourage more sharing. Here are some example question formats: "Tell me more about that..." "What do you mean by that?" "Can you tell me an example of that?" "What do you think about..."? Show that you're listening with body language. Make eye contact, face whomever you are listening to, and nod to show understanding. Put down the phone and turn off the TV while you're at it. Even if you're able to text and listen, it can be frustrating if others think you're ignoring them. Never expect the other person to read your mind. It might be obvious to you how you would feel in a particular situation, but it probably isn't obvious to anyone else.

Remember that everyone has had different life experiences, and their own ways of interpreting the world. Communication goes two ways. You have to listen and share. If you or the person you are trying to talk to are frequently distracted, set aside a short period of time to talk. Don't make it too long all at once (5-10 minutes is usually good). Set a timer, and end the conversation when the timer rings. Positive outcomes from therapy and counseling rely on the strength of the relationship between the mental health professional and the client. Such connections build on effective communication: what we express and how we express it (Wachtel, 2011).

Establishing empathy with clients requires a high degree of insight and a strong sense of shared understanding (Norcross, 2011). Thankfully, communication is a skill that can be monitored and improved through awareness, education, and practice. This article explores the importance of communication in therapy and counseling, introducing several vital skills and techniques and providing a set of worksheets to improve communication both inside and outside sessions. Before you continue, we thought you might like to download our three Positive Communication Exercises (PDF) for free. These science-based tools will help you and those you work with build better social skills and better connect with others.

Communication in Therapy and Counseling A task force set up by the American Psychological Association reviewed research on what makes therapeutic relationships most successful. Based on 16 meta-analyses, they found the following to be vital (Angelis, 2019): Agreeing therapy goals Getting client feedback Repairing ruptures (breakdowns in the therapeutic alliance) With the therapeutic relationship as essential as the treatment method, communication and collaboration become increasingly valuable to the overall outcomes of therapy and counseling (Angelis, 2019). Wachtel (2011, p. ix) highlights the importance of communication in the therapeutic technique and the need to "move from understanding the patient to client to putting that understanding into words." Communication may differ depending on the situation and the approach, yet it remains central to both talking cures and behavioral interventions. As a result, both seasoned professionals and those new to counseling or therapy will benefit from focusing on what they say and how they say it (Wachtel, 2011). Framing effective therapeutic comments and achieving a fuller understanding of what is being said are skills that rely on awareness, good technique, and practice. Communication can be subtle and multi-layered; an overt message often conveys a secondary meta-message. While we may not be conscious of the latter, it has considerable potential to affect therapeutic transformation – and failure. With that in mind, mental health professionals must care about what they and the client say and how they say it (Wachtel, 2011). Why Is Communication Important in Therapy? The words and phrases we choose with clients in therapy express feelings we want to convey and therefore matter greatly. They have the power to significantly impact the therapeutic alliance and outcome (Wachtel, 2011). Our communications are more than simple interventions; they shape "the climate of the relationship and the tenor of the alliance" (Wachtel, 2011, p. 3). Even subtle changes in communication style and content can alter the client's experience of the relationship, their progress, how they see themselves, and their potential for change. In addition to paying close attention to and comprehending their client, it is therefore vital that therapists consider what they say based on the understanding received. Therapists must use good communication skills to effectively and empathically put their observations into words, enabling the client to integrate new knowledge into an expanded sense of self without feeling shame (Wachtel, 2011). These detailed, science-based exercises will equip you or your clients with tools to improve communication skills and enjoy more positive social interactions with others. 5 Skills of Effective Therapists and Counselors There are at least five essential communication skills for use in counseling and therapy, including the following (Nelson-Jones, 2005). Verbal communication skills Messages sent using words, such as "I understand. Please tell me more." Trained and empathic listening professionals should consider: Is the language

Who owns the speech? The pronoun "you" should be used carefully; it can suggest judgment. Vocal communication skills How we talk can signify what we are really thinking and how we truly feel. Messages sent through the voice are influenced by the speaker's: Volume Articulation Pitch Emphasis Speech rate Each factor must be considered, tuned to the situation and subject, and modified to add variety to the conversation. Bodily communication skills Sometimes we forget to consider our whole body when we communicate, yet it can significantly affect communication, adding to or distracting from what we are saying. Touch communication skills When appropriate, a gentle touch to the arm or shoulder can communicate as much as and function alongside other communication skills. However, physical contact risks over-familiarity or inappropriate interest and must be considered carefully. Taking action communication skills Communication is not always face-to-face. Reminders may be sent before a session or as a follow-up, including homework, such as further reading or exercises. Communication boundaries are required to ensure that contact remains professional and through agreed methods. 17 Communication Techniques for Your Sessions While seeking understanding in therapy and counseling is vital, so too is helping clients recognize possibilities in their lives and replace life patterns that have been the source of problems (Wachtel, 2011). The following communication techniques are equally helpful in therapy and counseling, improving overall communication.

Repairing ruptures Many factors can lead to a breakdown in the alliance between the mental health professional and the client, including misunderstanding, mistrust, and disagreement on treatment goals (Angelis, 2019). Good communication and related techniques can repair ruptures and lead to better outcomes (Saffran et al., 2011). Outline the therapeutic rationale at the beginning of the treatment and then reiterate it throughout. Respond to disagreements by modifying behavior to something more meaningful to the client; for example, use validation rather than challenge. Clarify misunderstandings early. When the client appears to withdraw, explore what is happening and acknowledge their feelings. Exploring the themes related to the rupture can help uncover more general problems, issues, and concerns. Link ruptures in the alliance to other areas of the client's life. For example, concerns regarding lack of control during treatment may exist in other life domains. Feedback Communication can successfully strengthen relationships in therapy and counseling by gathering feedback from the client and incorporating it into treatment. Taking note of feedback is likely to improve therapeutic outcomes and reduce client dropout (Angelis, 2019). Several interventions can boost feedback in sessions and improve communication, including (Lambert & Shimokawa, 2011): Asking for and providing feedback on the therapeutic relationship Discussing shared experiences Increasing empathic engagement Offering more positive feedback Openly discussing readiness for change with the client Discussing the consequences of changing and not changing Empathy When communicating with a client, displaying empathy strengthens the therapeutic alliance and promotes client openness (Elliott et al., 2011; Angelis, 2019).

As an essential element of emotional intelligence, empathy promotes change and is a vital aspect of therapy and counseling. The ability and capacity to understand and share client feelings can be encouraged through several techniques, including (Elliott et al., 2011): Talking at a slower pace with periodic check-ins Actively listening to the client and reflecting back to them for their consideration Closely following the moving focus of the conversation as the therapy progresses Using empathic affirmation, such as, "Yes, it must be hard being pulled in all directions" Individualizing responses to clients so that they are relevant and personal Using evocative language to bring clients' experiences alive Empathic responses and the use of silence – Kelly Allison A Look at Nonverbal Communication in Counseling "Nonverbal behavior exists in the interface between nature and culture" (Rimondini, 2011, p. 110). Its function in communication is to create meaning (Eaves & Leathers, 2018). Nonverbal factors add to verbal communication by improving its accuracy and efficiency.

Feelings and emotions are often more fully and accurately revealed nonverbally (Eaves & Leathers, 2018). "When both speaking and listening, counselors, trainees, and clients disclose themselves through how they create their bodily communication" (Nelson-Jones, 2005, p. 22). Nonverbal communication factors to consider include: Gaze – useful for coordinating speech and collecting feedback. Eye contact – crucial for showing interest and empathy. Facial expression – are we showing shock, disgust, or understanding? Posture – turning your body toward the speaker shows interest and engagement.

Gestures – used to frame or illustrate what is being said or heard. Physical proximity – too close, and it can be awkward; too far, and a lack of connection may be felt. Clothes and personal grooming – appearing professional is vital, but so too is being able to connect, especially with a young person or group. 6 Worksheets & Activities for Improving Communication As with any skill, reflection and practice are valuable tools for improving communication in therapy and counseling. The following worksheets focus on multiple aspects of communication, enhancing awareness, and improving practical use. Practicing verbal communication skills for therapists and counselors Creating a safe environment for practicing communication skills is helpful for therapists and counselors new to the profession and the more experienced wishing to hone their skills. Use the Practice Verbal Communication Skills worksheet in a group setting to practice verbal communication and reflect on skills you could improve.

Assess Vocal Communication Skills Often, we are either unaware of our verbal skills or fail to reflect on them. Use the Assess Vocal Communication Skills worksheet to both self-assess and receive feedback from others regarding key factors in vocal communication. Consider what went well, not so well, and what you could do differently next time. Active listening in therapy and counseling We listen most effectively and form greater understanding when we actively listen to what is said. Use the following questions in the Active Listening in Session worksheet to reflect on a recent session with a client and the vital factors of active listening. Did you use open-ended questions?

Were you attentive? Did you seek clarification? Did you summarize what was said? Did you observe nonverbal as well as verbal communication? Did you use reflection (repeating back what you understood for confirmation)? Reflect on the answers you gave to each question and consider where you could improve or add additional focus in the future. Being present for communicating in therapy and counseling Awareness and being present are vital for effective communication in both counseling and therapy (Westland, 2015). Use the prompts in the Being Present worksheet to increase awareness of what is happening inside your mind, body, and the environment. Describe your subjective awareness at that time. What physical sensations did you experience (e.g., tension, tingles, pressure)? Describe your outer awareness at that time. What did you sense in the environment (e.g., noises, smells, touches, tastes)? Describe your awareness of fantasy at that time. What mental processes took you out of the present moment into planning, explaining, and thinking? Reflecting on each answer will help you increase understanding and awareness of your inner and outer world and improve your communication and understanding of the client.

Under- and over-involvement for communicating in therapy and counseling Two kinds of reaction in therapy can significantly affect and even harm communication: under-involvement and over-involvement. "The under-involved psychotherapist is aloof, cool, and insufficiently responsive. The over-involved psychotherapist has lost touch with boundaries and become submerged in the client's world" (Westland, 2015, p. 95). Use the Under- and Over-involvement in Communication worksheet to become more aware of what being too much and too little engaged with a client can be like. Consider each of the following reactions: Neutral – remaining present without any particular type of reaction or engagement. Over-involved – over-engaging yourself with the client; feeling fully and emotionally involved in everything they have to say. Under-involved – disengaging yourself from what the client is sharing; physically and mentally distancing yourself from what the client shares; gazing out the window or thinking about a recent event.

Types of speech during communication in therapy and counseling Depending on their personality, the treatment, and what is being discussed, the client may use one or more talking styles during a session (Westland, 2015). Use the Types of Speech worksheet to become more aware during counseling by identifying and reflecting on the different styles used by the client and considering what they may mean. Reflect on a recent session with a client and consider the following: Did the client talk at any point in a monotone – a single note? Did the client talk at any point on the horizontal, meaning their words were monotonous and seemed to fill the space? Did the client talk in an enticing and enthralling way? Did the client talk in a friendly yet circular way, never getting to the point? Did the client talk like a runaway train? Resources From PositivePsychology.com Good communication is essential to the process and outcome of therapy and counseling, and we have many resources that will help. Why not download our Positive Psychology Coaching Manuals or our On Becoming a Therapist guide for a wealth of information regarding the skills, practices, and training that will help you excel in your career as a counselor or therapist? Other free resources include: Nonverbal Mood-Spotting Game A fun activity for engaging children and adults in using and spotting nonverbal communication. Matching Nonverbal and Verbal Communication A set of questions to examine communication and attitudes during a recent engagement or session. Interpreting Body Language A practical worksheet for helping adults and children become more familiar with body language and its impact on communication. Body Communication Competence Using SOLER Use these helpful questions to reflect on your own and others' body language using the SOLER acronym. More extensive versions of the following tools are available with a subscription to the Positive Psychology Toolkit 6, but they are described briefly below: Listening Without Trying to Solve This valuable tool promotes listening without trying to problem-solve. During this group exercise, participants pair up to explore two different scenarios: Sharing a problem while being listened to Sharing a problem while being offered advice and solutions Taking turns, each member of the pair considers which listening approach is more beneficial. Mindful Versus Mindless

Listening Mindfulness encourages moment-to-moment awareness of the speaker's message rather than becoming distracted. Through teaming up with a partner, each person takes the role of both speaker and listener and adopts mindful and mindless listening. The experience is evaluated with a series of questions, including: What was it like being the storyteller/listener using mindful listening? What was it like being the storyteller/listener using mindless listening? If you're looking for more science-based ways to help others communicate better, check out this collection of 17 validated positive communication tools for practitioners. Use them to help others improve their communication skills and form deeper and more positive relationships. A Take-Home Message While essential in all aspects of our lives, effective communication is particularly valuable in therapy and counseling, impacting the treatment alliance and outcome.

Direct, clear, and positive communication can help confirm treatment goals, encourage and provide feedback, and repair breakdowns to the overall process. Reflecting on verbal and nonverbal communication can help us remove misunderstandings while clarifying the needs and meaning behind clients' actions and identifying the changes they wish to make and the goals they want to set. Whether you are new to the field or have years of experience, it is valuable to take time away from your busy schedule to consider what you say and how you say it. When treated as a craft, communication skills can be learned and improved through knowledge and practice to improve the client's treatment experience.

Why not review the article and try out some of the communication worksheets? Reflect on where improvements can be made to your approach and style and how you can further enhance your skills to improve the therapeutic process and outcomes. We hope you enjoyed reading this article. Don't forget to download our three Positive Communication Exercises (PDF) for free. Angelis, T. (2019). Better relationships with patients lead to better outcomes. Monitor on Psychology, 50(10), 38. Eaves, M. H., & Leathers, D. G. (2018). Successful nonverbal communication: Principles and applications. Routledge Elliott, R., Bohart, A. C., Watson, J. C., & Greenberg, L. (2011). Empathy. In J. C. Norcross (Ed.), Psychotherapy relationships that work: Therapist contributions and responsiveness to patients (pp. 203–223).

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