

# How Small Behaviors Can Have Big Impacts

Microexpressions — brief, subtle facial expressions — can negatively affect the therapeutic relationship unless counselors are aware and intentional in their use of these nonverbal clues.

By Rob McKinney, PhD, LMHC, and Stacy Pinto, PhD, LPCC

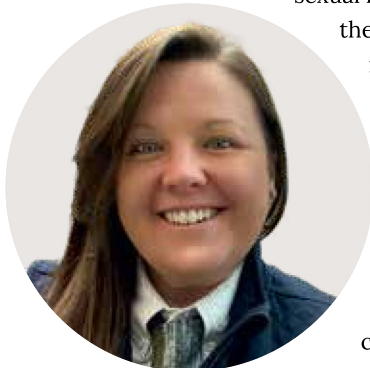
**“WE KNEW THEN** that this was not the counselor for us.” This was the response of a gay couple when asked about their experience seeking a counselor. The two men

were having sexual concerns within their partnership, so they started their counseling journey to find a solution. During the initial meeting with one counselor who asked about their predominant concern, the couple began to talk about their sex life, the concerns they were having and what they were hoping to resolve in counseling. In these preliminary moments of introducing their sexual history and related concerns,

the couple noticed a fleeting reaction of discomfort on the counselor’s face when the two men discussed their sex life. Although this expression lasted only a moment, it left a permanent mark on these two men, and they never returned to that provider. Instead, they continued their search for a counselor who would affirm their relationship and walk alongside them as they navigated their obstacles.



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## Microexpressions

While this anecdote provides another example of the all-too-often heard “one and done” counseling experience, it is also unique because the clients were able to identify and articulate the moment they knew this counselor was not the one for them: when they saw the microexpression of discomfort on the counselor’s face.

The idea of microexpressions has been studied for over 50 years. Some of the first research can be traced back to 1966 when Ernest Haggard and Kenneth Isaacs, in their chapter published in *Methods of Research in Psychotherapy*, noted facial behaviors that were short-lived and difficult to observe. Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen first referred to these behaviors as microexpressions in a 1969 issue of *Psychiatry*.

While a facial expression like smiling can involve several muscles, last multiple seconds and is often done intentionally by the person, microexpressions involve fewer muscles, can last as short as a second and may be produced involuntarily, as noted by Ekman and Friesen in their 1982 article published in the *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*.

Guoying Zhao and colleagues, in their 2023 article published by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, defined microexpressions as fleeting, subtle and spontaneous reactions toward emotional stimuli. This topic even made its way into pop culture in the early 2000s with the television show *Lie to Me*, which featured a body language specialist highlighting how facial expressions can be used to uncover the truth behind lies.

## The Face of Counseling

Counselors are trained in the art of nonverbal communication. We can make gestures with our hands as a form of animation to help solidify a point in session or to highlight a client’s achievement. More subtly, we are trained to indicate to clients that we are listening by using a slight head nod periodically in session. Therefore, professionally, we know the importance of body language and are trained in how to utilize our bodies for effective communication and counseling outcomes.

Yet, perhaps less discussed in counselor preparation programs or considered in our

daily counseling practice are our own micro-expressions and the nuances of managing them. Expressions that flash across the face of counselors may reveal our hidden sentiments of amusement or anxiety, disgust or pride, or embarrassment or shame. Because these expressions can be quick and involuntary, we are often unaware of them and their effects on clients.

### Practices for Consideration

Counselors must build their awareness of micro-expressions as a form of communication that they are presenting to clients or else we risk being the next counselor from which clients walk away like in the opening example.

To begin this journey, we need to start by increasing our own self-awareness. The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, developed by Manivong Ratts and colleagues in 2015, highlight the need of counselors to develop their own self-awareness as they explore their personal attitudes and beliefs. Such self-work for the counselor in our opening example might include examining attitudes toward gay sex, beliefs about LGBTQ+ individuals (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender/two-spirit, gender-expansive, queer/questioning, intersex, agender/aromantic/asexual, pansexual/pangender/polygender/poly relationship systems, and others; learn more about initialism at [saigecounseling.org/initialism](http://saigecounseling.org/initialism)), and how the counselor might best show up in session for this community.

From an ethical lens, all counselors are obligated to explore attitudes, beliefs, thoughts and feelings about diverse communities, as well as marginalized individuals and groups, to uncover potential biases and limit the risk of imposing our personal values on our work with clients. As elements arise in our own awareness that may need to be addressed, we can then pursue our own education or counseling to refine and fortify our competence in these areas. We can learn more about our own microexpressions through observation — such as watching your face in a mirror or on a video call during a conversation or watching recorded counseling sessions — and through

feedback — counselors-in-training can consult with instructors; counselors in the field can seek feedback from a supervisor or peers in consultation groups.

Awareness is the first step toward intentionality in practice. As awareness builds, we can work to control our expressions by exercising mindfulness and practicing the skills of managing our expressions. Pursuing these practices can help counselors catch and adjust these small, fleeting behaviors that have the power to alter the course of a session or, in some cases, an entire professional relationship.

However brief and seemingly inconsequential they may seem, microexpressions can have a big impact on relationship building and the cultivation of trust with clients. Ralph Waldo Emerson captures the importance of being intentional in our nonverbal communication in his essay *The Conduct of Life*: “The eyes of men converse as much as their tongues, with the advantage, that the ocular dialect needs no dictionary, but is understood all the world over.”

With Emerson’s words in mind, counselors can work to leverage all avenues of communication with clients through deliberate integration of microexpressions into their counseling practice. ■

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