

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A counselor can improve client communication by using the following techniques:

“Third-personing”

This technique can be used to normalize client feelings. Examples:

“Oftentimes teens are worried about parents finding out about their use of birth control.”

“It can be difficult for some people to talk about using a condom with their sexual partner.”

This technique allows the client to respond to the statement and talk about their feelings if they choose. It allows the client to correct counselor assumptions.

“To the Nth Degree”

This skill allows the client to define his or her own priorities and needs. By using the *Nth degree*, you can help a client figure out his or her priorities.

“Your dealing with many different issues. What concerns you most?”

“Which side effects would cause you the most discomfort?”

Counselors sometimes hesitate to ask these types of questions, as they might not fall within our agenda. This technique shows respect for the client’s needs and allows the client to control the session’s direction.

“Offering Options”

When a client is struggling with a decision, a counselor can offer a “buffet of options,” allowing the client to choose which options might work for him or her. This approach helps the counselor to give the client a selection of choices without using the information to influence the client’s choice. Examples:

“Some people decide not to have sex at all.”

“Other people find ways to be sexual without having intercourse.”

“Others use a latex condom with each and every act of intercourse.”

When clients do not choose from the options, the counselor could use the “If, then” approach. An example is to say to the client, “If you want to avoid getting an STD, you’ll want to consider one of these options.” This technique is a powerful reminder of where the responsibility for behavior change lies.

“Paraphrasing”

Paraphrasing lets the speaker know that they have been heard and understood by the listener. Paraphrasing means using different language to reinforce what the client has said. Paraphrasing allows the client to give you feedback if you’ve misunderstood them.

Example: Client – I'm worried about asking my boyfriend to use a condom."
Counselor – It sounds like you have some concerns about your
boyfriend's agreement to use a condom."

“Reflected feelings”

Using “reflected feelings,” the counselor states back to the client the feelings that they have heard expressed. *Reflected feelings* listens for and confirms the client's responses. It is more effective if the intensity of the counselor's response matches the client's intensity.

Example: Client – I have a hard time with routines and might not take the pill everyday.
Counselor – It sounds like remembering to take the pill everyday might be difficult for you.

“Acknowledge/normalize”

Acknowledge or normalize client's feelings to reassure them. (builds trust, openness and self-respect.)

Statements that normalize:

“I have heard a lot of women say that.”
“That's a pretty common reaction.”
“I felt that way too.”

“Affirming Statements”

Genuine affirmation improves the client's sense of well-being and builds on client strengths and past successes. Affirmations are best when focused on something the client has done or stated.

Examples:

“Thanks for coming today.”
“I appreciate your excellent questions.”
“We covered a lot of information today. Thank you for staying through it.”

“Roadblocks”

There are ways in which communication can be interrupted or blocked unintentionally by the listener's response.

Thomas Gordon's Roadblocks to Listening

Order, direct, command, warn, threaten, give advice, make suggestions, persuade, argue, lecture, nag, moralize, preach, “should”, disagree, judge, blame, console, reassure, question or probe, withdraw, distract, humor, label, shame, ridicule, agree, approve, praise.

Reference: DHS, HIV Counseling and Testing Program