

CHAPTER 6

Master the Art of Probing and Summarizing

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- (6.1 **Develop an Appreciation of the Power of Nudging**
- (6.2 **Become Competent in Various Types of Effective Probing**
 - Use both Verbal and Nonverbal Prompts
 - Learn to Use Different Forms of Probing
 - Use Questions Sparingly and Effectively
 - Follow the Guidelines for Using Probes
 - Follow Probes with Empathic Responses
- (6.3 **Provide Focus and Direction by Using Summaries**
 - Use Summaries When They Add Value
 - Get Clients to Provide Summaries
 - Review the Use of Summaries and Probes in the Case of Marcus and Andrea
- (6.4 **Come to Grips with the Shadow Side of Communication Skills**
 - Keep in Mind That Communication Skills Are Necessary but Not Sufficient
 - Distinguish between the Helping Relationship and Helping Technologies
 - Find Ways of Developing Proficiency in Communication Skills

Develop an Appreciation of the Power of Nudging LO 6.1

In Chapter 2 it was noted that all attempts to help others involve, to one degree or another, influencing them. Helpers influence their clients. The trick is to influence them to do such things as discussing difficult problems; developing new life-enhancing perspectives on themselves, others, and the world; working on the right issues; exploring possibilities for a better future; choosing and committing themselves to problem-managing goals; exploring ways of achieving these goals; and engaging in the kind of effective and efficient action needed to accomplish all of this—to influence them, certainly, but without robbing them of their freedom. Thaler and Sunstein (2008), in a fascinating and useful book entitled *Nudge*, call this kind of influence “libertarian paternalism.” The influence part is, in some sense, paternalistic and the freedom part is libertarian. Paternalism does not necessarily connote coercion, whether physical or psychological. And libertarian in the sense in which they use the term certainly does not mean, “Do whatever you want.”

In the book they talk about “**choice architects**,” that is, someone who “has the responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions” (p. 3). Because decision-making is one of the key ingredients of successful therapy, it is important to explore the role helpers play in organizing the context in which clients make decisions. Because helpers cannot avoid influencing their clients, they are choice architects. Treatment models, including the Skilled Helper framework itself together with the methods and communications skills that make it work, provide different kinds of **choice architecture**. In the hands of savvy and principled helpers the model, methods, and skills of any treatment approach can be used as “**nudges**.” Thaler and Sunstein describe a nudge as “any aspect of the choice architecture that alters behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options” (p. 6). Of course, the predictability referred to is the predictability of the social rather than the physical sciences. For instance, we have already seen that an empathic response to a client can constitute a nudge in two ways. First of all, because helpers cannot reply empathically to everything a client says, their selective responding is a form of influence. Second, empathic responses tend to influence clients to explore the issue being discussed more broadly or deeply. But, while empathic responses might well (but not necessarily) influence clients, they do not pin clients down.

Nudges have power, but they are “gentle.” In the hands of a skillful helper nudges lead to collaboration rather than standing in the way of it. Skillful nudging does not overwhelm clients. It keeps clients at the center of the decision-making process. As we shall see, the next two communication skills, **probing** and **summarizing**, often take the form of nudges. Their “gentle power,” rightly used, can be of great benefit to clients.

Nudging has proved to be so useful that the government of the United Kingdom has set up a “nudge unit” (Halpern, 2016). “Seemingly small and subtle solutions have led to huge improvements across tax, healthcare, pensions, employment, crime reduction, energy conservation, and economic growth.” Behavioral nudges are everywhere in many societies from calorie counts on packaged foods and menus to “annoying” seat-belt notification systems. Cohen, Lynch, and Robertson (2016; see also Robertson, 2017) have edited a book in which the work of 45 experts in behavior science study the effectiveness and efficiency of nudging in healthcare.

Become Competent in Various Types of Effective Probing 10

6.2

In most of the examples used in the discussion of sharing empathic responses, clients have explored themselves and their behavior relatively easily. Obviously, this is not always the case. Although it is essential that helpers respond with empathy when their clients do reveal themselves, it is also necessary at times to nudge, encourage, or prompt clients to explore their concerns when they fail to do so spontaneously. Therefore the ability to use prompts and probes effectively is another important communication skill. If sharing empathic responses 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 every stage of the helping process. For instance, counselors can use probes to help clients identify and explore opportunities they have been overlooking, to clear up blind spots, to translate dreams into realistic goals, to come up with realistic plans for accomplishing goals, or to work through obstacles that are preventing action. Probes, judiciously used, provide focus and direction for the entire helping process. We start with prompts.

Use Both Verbal and Nonverbal Prompts

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

Nonverbal prompts Counselors' various nonverbal behaviors can have the force of probes. For example, a client who has been talking about how difficult it is to make a peace overture to a neighbor with whom she is at odds says, “I just can't do it!” The helper says nothing but, rather, simply cocks his head, leans back with a quizzical look, 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. Such things as bodily movements, gestures, nods, eye movement, and the like can be used as nonverbal prompts or nudges. But they must be natural. They must be you.

Vocal and verbal prompts You can use such responses as “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, that you do not know what else to do, or that you are on automatic pilot. In the following example, a 35-year-old successful engineer has sought the help of a therapist for his intense fear of public speaking that has become problematic since being promoted to a managerial position at his company. Currently, he is anxious about an upcoming meeting he has to lead.

CLIENT: I just freeze. I feel my hands get sweaty, my heart rate quickens, and I forget everything we have been working on. I just don't want to make a mistake. If I am not perfect I feel like everyone will say I didn't deserve the promotion [he pauses]. And I know we have talked about it, but I just can't get it through my head that no one is expecting me to be some great speaker. This is just me and my expectations!

HELPER: Uh-huh. [The helper says with a nod and a soft smile.]

CLIENT (laughs): My emotions are like a fire alarm telling me I am being unrealistic. Of course, my supervisor told me that one of the reasons I got promoted was that we set challenging but realistic goals for our division, that we were an example for the rest of the company. We were methodical. Maybe I should apply that to my public speaking and realize it will take time to be the speaker I want to be or at least need to be.

The helper's small affirmative "Uh-huh" prompts the client to further consider what he has just said. Prompts should never be the main course, but they are useful condiments in the therapeutic dialogue.

Learn and Use Different Types of Probing

Used judiciously, probes help clients name, take notice of, explore, clarify, or further define an issue at any point in the helping process. They are designed to provide clarity and to move things forward. Probes 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 just 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." Statement probes 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...." "I guess I'm still confused about...." This kind of request puts the responsibility on clients without accusing them 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 there'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." This is helpful new information. 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. Whether they should be that common or not is a different issue.

- "How do you react when he flies off the handle?"
- "In situations like that, what keeps you from making a decision?"
- "Now that the indirect approach to getting him to provide for the kids 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. Or am I just hearing things?" 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 and your style of relating at work that you don't want to lose." When the client responds, "That's right!" The counselor asks, "What might that be?" The client hesitates for a moment and then says, "Spunk!" The counselor replies, "Well, maybe there's a way of keeping your spunk without giving in to outbursts that get you in trouble." They go on to discuss the practical differences between assertiveness and aggression.

Single 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." This kind of clarity helps. 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. They are an invitation to provide "more"—more information, more thought, or more emotion, depending upon the situation. Therefore a few words about the use of questions are in order.

Use questions sparingly and 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. On the other hand, questions, judiciously used, can be an important part of your interactions with clients. Here are two guidelines.

Do not ask too many 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 that are being used because the helper does not have anything better to say. I have caught myself asking questions, the answers to which I did not even

want to know. Let's assume that the helper is working with Rollie, an inmate in a state facility for young offenders. He is doing time for burglary and drug use. Because he is difficult to work with and blames everything on his dysfunctional family, the counselor ends up asking a whole series of questions out of frustration:

- "When did you first feel caught in the messiness of your family?"
- "What did you do to try to get away from their influence?"
- "What could you do different?"
- "What kind of friends did you have?"

These questions are no more than a random search for information, the value of which is not clear. Rollie is an expert in evading questions like this. Professionals have grilled him, and when he tires of being questioned, he just clams up. Helping that turns into a question-and-answer session tends to 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, how do you see the future? What plans do you have?" Counselors who ask closed questions find themselves asking more and more questions. One closed question leads to another. Of course, if a specific piece of information is needed, then a closed question may be used. A career counselor might ask, "How many jobs have you had in the past 2 years?" The information is relevant to helping the client draw up a resume and a job-search strategy. Of course, occasionally, a sharp closed question can have the right impact. For instance, a client has been outlining what he was going to do to get back at his "ungrateful" son. The counselor asks, "Is getting back at him what you really want?" Rhetorical questions like this are a form of challenge. If the client responds by saying, "You're damn right I do!" then you know more about the intensity of his feelings. And you know you are facing a tricky issue. In general, though, open-ended questions in moderation can help clients fill in what is missing at every stage of the helping process.

Respond constructively to questions clients ask Waelher and Grandy (2016) have studied this. Their research indicates that too many helpers respond poorly to clients' questions. Actually, clients' questions offer opportunities for collaboration.

Unfortunately, therapists often feel that they must choose between the extremes of answering a client's question fully, thereby maintaining a strong client-therapist relationship (and perhaps exercising their own desire to be seen as competent and knowledgeable) while inhibiting the client's ability to achieve further insight, or, conversely, refusing to answer the client's questions, thereby having the client ponder the answer in isolation and putting the client-therapist relationship in jeopardy.

Edelstein and Waelher (2011) establish guidelines for constructively responding to clients' questions. First, be open to questions and show respect by listening to such questions. Take the questions seriously. Second, explore what is going on in the client's mind. Encourage clients to be curious. Third, answer the questions as fully as it merits. Keep the client engaged. Fourth, explore the dynamics of the question with the client. Discuss the meaning of the question in a positive way. Note that these guidelines can also be applied to your questions. For instance, if you ask a question and the client asks, "Why do you want to know that?" be ready to respond constructively.

Follow the Guidelines for Using Probes

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

Use your ongoing feedback system as a way of probing Whether you use measures such as Duncan's or some other way of systematically getting feedback from the client on both progress toward and the achievement of outcomes and quality of therapy sessions, the feedback system is an excellent opportunity for probing. Consider these two brief examples. In the first example, Leena is a single mother who lost her fairly well-paying job during the economic disaster. She was a "hip" drinker when times were good but turned into a problem drinker when things turned sour. She spent what she earned on her lifestyle so there was no financial cushion when things went south. She felt sorry for herself and spent a lot of time railing against all the usual suspects everyone was blaming for the financial crash. In the first session she understandably rated herself rather low on the how-are-you-doing-individually scale. Her rating went up significantly in the second session because she thought that counseling was the answer. But here in the third session she rates herself lower than she did in the first session.

HELPER: I see the 'Individual' score has taken a hit, Leena. What's the message? ... I think I might be reading it in your face and posture.

LEENA: I felt so good after the last session. I was fired up. My hopes were high; they were flying. I was going to take my life back. But two days later I received a couple of default notices. My boss told us we would all have to take a cut in

pay. And my boyfriend described me as "scary." My world collapsed. I collapsed. I just don't know how I'm going to recover.

HELPER: So, for a while you soared, then the crash.

LEENA (emphatically): I was shot down!

HELPER: Shot down?

LEENA: Yes, I was attacked on all sides. Bank, work, boyfriend. Even the kids ganged up on me.

HELPER: You said your hopes soared. Tell me more about that.

LEENA: Well, I thought it was going to be easy to pull everything together. I just felt so good. Now I'm thinking that I can't pull this off at all. It's just too much. It's going to take so much work. Budgets. Working out repayment schedules. I have to create a whole new lifestyle. **HELPER:** The misery is very real. But let's put it aside for a moment. What good might come from all of this? What could you mine from it?

LEENA (pauses): Nothing! (The helper remains silent.) ... (in a more subdued voice) I suppose I could become more realistic.... Come back to earth.

HELPER: OK. Let's see what this "realism" might look like.

They go on to draw a picture of what a more "realistic" lifestyle might look like. Leena gradually relaxes as they discuss possibilities.

The second example deals with the therapeutic alliance measure at the end of the session. Leena rates the "Overall" category higher than the other two sessions.

HELPER: Well, Leena, what made this session work for you?

LEENA: One very bittersweet word. Realism.

HELPER: OK. How did that work?

LEENA: It triggered something in me. I hate self-centered people and all of a sudden I saw myself as self-centered (she stops).

HELPER: I'm not sure I understand the interplay between "realism" and "self-centered" and your score for the session.

LEENA: One lesson from the financial crash is that we were all—well, many of us—were living beyond our means. Maybe our whole society, government and all. Like a national self-centeredness. I feel that I'm a fairly intelligent person. But all that was stupid. The dose of realism during this session was very good for me, especially because we went about it in a constructive way.

This session opened the door to progress, to life-enhancing outcomes. During the dialogue realism was defined in terms of concrete possibilities. This edged Leena away from the brink of "impossible" and she recaptured some of her enthusiasm, but perhaps a more realistic brand.

Use probes to help clients engage as fully as possible in the therapeutic dialogue As noted earlier, many clients do not have all the communication skills needed to engage in the problem-managing and opportunity-developing dialogue. Probes are the principal tools needed to help all clients engage in the give-and-take of the helping dialogue. Consider Cornell, a counselor in a community mental health center, and a client, Allen, who is seeking treatment because his wife has said he must go to counseling because of an act of infidelity. "Go," she said, "or the marriage is over." Both Allen and his wife described their marriage as "happy" and "good" before Allen had the one-night stand. Allen was a regional manager of a mid-size company. The incident happened during a business trip. He was traveling with a woman who was a sales representative at one of the regional offices he managed. Allen said she had flirted with him for months. He went to dinner with her and they ended up going back to his motel room. In his first session, he explains that he was not really attracted to his colleague and does not know why he slept with her.

ALLEN: I didn't have any feelings for her. Still don't. I just went along with it. I don't think I would do it again. But then why not? It happened so easily.

CORNELL: You seem concerned that you didn't feel anything, that your feelings should have been a signal.

ALLEN: Yeah, I guess so. I just don't ever seem to feel anything.

CORNELL: Do you feel guilty about what happened?

ALLEN: Not really. I know I should but I don't feel that either.

They continue to discuss Allen's lack of feeling and not experiencing emotional connection for the next couple of sessions. Allen has long wondered what was wrong. He did not get sad at funerals or as he said, "even when the family cat died." He cares about his wife and wants to stay with her, but does not experience a deep emotional connection with her. He has lots of friends and good interpersonal skills. Cornell also likes him. However, he does not have a "best" or "good" friend with whom he feels connected. Cornell suspects that Allen struggles with "alexithymia," a term used to describe someone who has difficulty expressing or identifying emotions within one's self or others. They discuss this possibility; Allen agrees that it makes sense. He said he grew up in a "broken family" where he got little attention except when he was in trouble. Even then he said his parents seemed preoccupied with their own problems. He described his upbringing as "sterile." Here is an excerpt from their third session. They have agreed to work on identifying and expressing emotions.

ALLEN: Yeah, I worry that I will be unfaithful again but, at the same time, I have no desire to do so.

CORNELL: Tell me more about the "worry" part.

ALLEN: I did ... I mean I don't want to mess up my family. I don't want to cause my daughter any pain.

CORNELL: You mean, like the pain you experienced when you were growing up?

ALLEN: I do (looking more intently).

CORNELL: What that was like for you?

ALLEN: Everything was so unpredictable I didn't know what was going to happen next. I don't want that for her. Always on edge.

Note how Cornell uses nudges. First, he notes that Allen used the term "worry." There was no "aha, you do feel!" but a subtle identification of a feeling. Second, he notes that he feels empathy for his daughter and connects it to his own experience as a child in his "broken family." Cornell asks what that was like for Allen. Notice he does not ask him how he feels because, in one way or another, Allen has already told him. "How do you feel?" is so often an insipid question. The nudges are meant to help Allen realize that he does have emotions and, at the right time, can express them. There is certainly more work to be done. Therapy is not easy for Allen. But Cornell's strategic nudges and probes gently help Allen get in touch with the world of emotion.

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 have an idea of what's going on. But we haven't talked about it much. Well, not at all.

In this example, the helper's probe leads to a clearer statement of the client's experience and behavior. By sharing empathic responses 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 daydream about things that make me feel good.

HELPER: What kinds of things?

CLIENT: Well, I daydream about that in the near future I will have a different life. I am in great shape, have a better job, and I always have the answers. People look up to me and realize that actually my quietness is a strength that they are drawn to. I have good friends.

HELPER: You daydream about having a different life. In that life, what you usually see as a weakness, your quietness, is really a strength. And that you see this happening soon. Do I have that right?

CLIENT: Yes. It is a mixture of mainly unrealistic thoughts sprinkled in with a few realistic ones. I guess daydreaming about things being different, being better, makes it easy for me to deal with how unhappy I am with my social life. Saying it out

loud makes me realize that daydreaming helps keep me from doing anything about it now.

The helper's probe leads to a clearer statement of what is going on in the client's head. Helping the client explore his fantasy life could be a first step toward finding out what he really wants. What are the possibilities? His daydreaming, paradoxically, keeps him rooted in a life he does not want.

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, her sense of desperation. 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 explore and clarify clients' points of view, intentions, proposals, and decisions Clients often fail to clarify their points of view, intentions, proposals, and decisions. For instance, a client might announce some decision she has made. But the decision itself is unclear, and the reasons behind it and the implications for the client and others are not spelled out. In the following case, the client has had a bad automobile accident while driving under the influence. 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 unresolved psychological problems—for instance, a lack of self-responsibility. A counselor has been helping him work through some of these issues. The following exchange takes place during 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.... I'm not sure why 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: Well, let's explore a little. Hmm, let's say all laws on driving under the influence were dropped. Then, starting from zero, you were asked to start adding ones that make sense. Where would you start?

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 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 (a long pause): 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 how cases like mine tend to go in court.... I'd like to know that before spending a lot of money on a defense lawyer.... What do you think?

The counselor is using probes to help the client explore the possible unintended consequences of a decision he is making.

The state has very tough DUI laws. In the end, because the client's blood-alcohol level was so high, his license is suspended for six months, he is fined heavily, and he 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.

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 that you've had the wake-up call, a horrible wake-up call, it might make sense to start piecing the future together. What do you think?

CLIENT: I've 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. It asks the client, what do you want to accomplish?

Use probes to help clients fill in missing pieces of the picture Probes further the therapeutic dialogue by helping clients identify missing pieces of the puzzle— thoughts, experiences, behaviors, and feelings that would help both clients and helpers get a better fix on the problem situation, unused opportunity, possibilities for a better future, or drawing up a plan of action. In the following example, the client 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 in the face 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 why I'm making such a fuss.

So now it's clear that the client does little to change things. It is also obvious that he has not considered how he might influence the situation.

In the next example, a collegiate tennis player, Maria, a young woman from Mexico where her family lives, was encouraged to meet with the athletic department's psychologist. Her coach is concerned that Maria does not seem to be herself. She "tightens up" during matches. Maria reluctantly goes, but she is also aware that she has not been feeling like her normal "confident" self.

HELPER: This lack of self-confidence. Is this something new? Or does it come and go? Tell me a bit about it.

MARIA: Pretty much ever since the spring season started. It is kind of like I am a different player. I just can't seem to get thing clicking like normal. And so when I get in matches, I start getting tight and quit trusting my game.

HELPER: So this is relatively new.

MARIA: Yes. I have begun to worry a lot. I can't seem to stay focused.

HELPER: So what do you worry about?

MARIA: I'm usually focused. I think of strategy and how make the next shot. I was just playing.

HELPER: But it seems that something has disrupted "just playing." Playing well, making the shots was your usual focus. Now....

MARIA: Now my mind wanders to things like "what will happen if I lose?" Even when I know I'm better than my opponent. I get distracted and the next thing you know, I lose the point.

HELPER: So this isn't the usual you. Any hunches of what has changed for you?

MARIA: I am not sure. I got back from seeing my family in Mexico over the semester break and everything seems different. It was so hard to leave them this time. I'm not a political person at all, but they were worried. It's contagious. Right now

it's scary as a Mexican in the United States. This is new for me. Traveling was always exciting, but now I was worried they would not let me through customs. It made me feel like I was doing something wrong and even worse like I didn't deserve to be here. To top it off, money is tight at home, my mom's health is not good, and it was clear my parents were stressed. It just made me want to stay home. But talking about college and my tennis success makes my parents so happy. They're so proud. Here I am supposed to have this great experience and, yet, it does not feel like that right now.

HELPER: That's a lot for you to be carrying around with you. So being here is both a joy and a problem.

MARIA: It's always been a joy! I love it here. My parents love me being here. Otherwise I'd go back and be with them.

HELPER: What makes you want to stay here?

MARIA: Two things. My parents want me to be here. They love it.... The second is—this might sound odd—I belong here. I have a sports scholarship. The university is doing its job. I'm doing mine. I'm getting an excellent education. It's been working very well, until now. Now politics around the world, Mexico included, seems to be crazy. It's something I don't know how to solve.

HELPER: Maybe "solve" is not the right word.

MARIA: What do you mean?

HELPER: Some problems are so big, so complicated, and so deeply rooted that no one can "solve" them. You are facing a lot of political turmoil. Millions of people are. You cannot "solve," but you can "manage" problems like that.

MARIA: How do I manage? What does that mean? I haven't been thinking about the political climate. I just keep thinking that I'm not doing well. And it's making me make more mistakes.

Maria's counselor goes on to help her cut a huge social problem to size. This is the first step in managing. The psychologist continued to use multiple probes derived from the problem management process to help her understand how she had become the target of irrational prejudice. Managing meant continuing to be the best possible student and the best possible tennis player even when under stress. The counselor helped explore ways of dealing with prejudice.

Use probes to help clients get a balanced view of problem situations and opportunities In their eagerness to discuss an issue or make a point, clients 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 been saddled with a bright, highly ambitious and aggressive young woman who plays politics to further her own interests, has been agonizing over her 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 person. 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 suppose. 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 through all this. It is an opportunity to come to grips with the interpersonal dynamics of the workplace and a chance to explore "positive" political skills.

Use probes to help clients move into more beneficial stages of the helping process Probes can be used to help clients engage in dialogue about any part of the helping process—telling their stories more fully, surfacing blind spots, setting goals, formulating action strategies, discussing obstacles to action, and reviewing actions taken. Clients sometimes do not easily move into whatever stage of the helping process might be most useful for them. Probes can help them do so. For example, Leslie is talking with a health psychologist about making significant lifestyle changes after her heart attack. She is anxious to get started but is overwhelmed by how to get started and has outlined multiple changes she wants to make.

COUNSELOR: Leslie, you have some good ideas here, and yet it is like you are going in a thousand different directions at once.

LESLIE (speaking hurriedly): I know. I just feel like if I don't hurry up and start with the next chapter in my life—the "healthy me" chapter. Having my heart attack was a wake-up call to change my habits.

COUNSELOR: Let's slow down and catch our breaths for a second. This wake-up call seems to be more than just about changing your lifestyle.

changing your lifestyle.

LESLIE (beginning to cry and looking down): I'm ... I'm just so scared. I thought I was going to die, my whole life flashed before my eyes. Like in a novel or movie. It was so surreal, like it was happening to someone else.

COUNSELOR: That does sound scary. Maybe we should start there, you have been through so much.

LESLIE: Maybe I should slow down ... that is good for my heart, right? (looking up and smiling faintly). It has all been a bit much for me and I have just kept it bottle up trying to pretend everything was okay, that I would just fix it. But it is not.

The counselor uses probes to get Leslie to tell her story fully, to share more completely what was going on with her. She had a traumatic experience, a life-changing experience, and needs to talk about it before moving forward to manage her problem. There is a danger of getting ahead of the client. But, as Leslie demonstrates, sometimes we have to go back and get the client's full story before intelligently moving ahead to action.

The next example is about how to help move the client forward. This client has been talking endlessly about the affair her husband is having. Her husband 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 of them. 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 in a situation like this who did an outrageous thing. She knew her teenage daughter was aware of what was going on. 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 possible way. Let's hear some more.

This primes the pump. The counselor uses a few more probes to put a number of possibilities on the table. The focus on action brings energy to the session.

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—stand in the way of his picking up his life again. The session has bogged down a bit. The helper takes an entrepreneurial approach.

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. Me, that is, Justin.

JUSTIN (pausing a long time): I'm not much of an actor, but here goes nothing.... 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 is 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 would try. However painful this is for Justin, it is a breakthrough.

Use probes to invite clients to challenge themselves In the last chapter we saw that even sharing empathic responses can act as a mild form of social-influence or challenge. We also saw that effective responses often act as probes. That is, they can be indirect requests for further information or ways of steering a client toward a more productive stage of the helping process. And, as you have probably noticed in the examples used in this chapter, probes can edge much closer to outright invitations to self-challenge. 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. Probes can 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. But just now 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" in some decent way 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?

Call me... with... Empathic... ..

Follow Probes with Empathic Responses

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 given helping session, however, the skills must be intermingled 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. That depends on the client, client needs, the problem situation, possible opportunities, and the stage of the helping process.

Here is a basic guideline about sharing empathic responses and using probes. After using a probe to which a client responds, respond with empathy to what the client has to say. Check 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, an empathic response, if accurate, tends to place a demand on the client to explore further. It puts the ball back in the client's court.

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 not uncommon subservience 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 A: To what degree is this self-effacing role rooted in your culture?

COUNSELOR A: *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 very 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 consider 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 response 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 after a downturn in the 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 needed for the better jobs. The digital world and social media are mysteries to her. She feels stuck, 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 makes 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 stop playing that game. It's one 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 again I'd find things easy. The economy may be humming, but jobs, good jobs, are still scarce. 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 some 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.

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

reposition myself.

BOX 6.1 Guidelines in Using Probes

- Keep in mind the goals of probing. Use probes to:
 - Help clients engage as fully as possible in the therapeutic dialogue.
 - Help nonassertive or reluctant clients tell their stories and engage in other behaviors related to managing their problems and developing opportunities.
 - Help clients identify experiences, behaviors, and feelings that give focus to their stories.
 - Help clients open up new areas for discussion.
 - Help clients explore and clarify stories, feelings, points of view, decisions, and proposals.
 - Help clients be as concrete and specific as possible.
 - Help clients remain focused on relevant and important issues.
 - Help clients move on to a further stage of the helping process.
- Use probes to provide nudges or mild challenges to clients to examine the way they think, behave, and act both within helping sessions and in their daily lives.
- Make sure that probing is done in the spirit of empathy.
- Use a mix of statements, open-ended questions, prompts, and requests, not questions alone.
- Follow up a successful probe with an empathic response rather than another probe.
- Use whatever judicious mixture of empathic responses 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 action.

This combination of empathic responses 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.

You should be careful not to become either an empathic response “machine,” grinding out one 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 a solid understanding of the client’s core messages and points of view. All responses that build on and add to the client’s remarks are implicitly empathic, which cuts down on the need to share a steady stream of empathic responses. Box 6.1 summarizes guidelines for using probes.

Provide Focus and Direction by Using Summaries LO 6.3

The communication skills of visibly tuning in, listening, responding with empathy, 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 to help clients summarize the main points of a helping interchange or session is a skill that can be used to provide focus, direction, and challenge.

Use Summaries When They Add Value

Brammer (1973) listed several 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 the session seems to be going nowhere, and when the client needs a new perspective.

At the beginning of a new session Using summaries at the beginning of a new session, especially when clients seem uncertain about how to begin, prevents clients from merely repeating what has already been said before. It puts clients under pressure to move on. Consider this example: Liz, a social worker, begins a session with a rather overly talkative man by summarizing the main points from 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 client’s court and give them an opportunity to exercise initiative. Of course, if you are getting feedback from clients at the beginning and at the end of each session, the flow from

session to session will be much smoother.

During a session that is going nowhere Helpers can use a summary to 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 discussing 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, Marcia is a coach, consultant, and counselor who is working with the staff of a shelter for the homeless. One of the staff members is showing signs of burnout. In a second meeting with Marcia, she keeps going over the same ground, talking endlessly about stressful incidents that have taken place over the last few months. At one point Marcia provides a summary.

MARCIA: 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 or the 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 you're going to stay and if these kinds of incidents are not going to stop, maybe some questions might be, "How do I cope with them? How do I do my work and get some ongoing satisfaction from it? What changes can we make around here that might lessen the number of these incidents?"

The purpose of the summary here 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 to create a supportive work environment, develop a sense of organizational and personal purpose, promote the kind of teamwork that fits the institution's mission, and foster a culture of coping strategies.

When the 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 of his behavior at home, but in a rather disjointed way.

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.

CLIENT: Hmm ... Well, I'd ... hmmm ... (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 many decisions for her, and some of them are big" theme implied in the summary. Helping clients develop new perspectives is the focus of Chapter 7.

In the following example, the client is a 52-year-old man who has been talking about a number of problems he is experiencing. He has come for help because he has been "down in the dumps" and cannot seem to shake it.

HELPER:: Let's take a look at what we've seen so far. You're down—not just a normal slump; this time it's hanging on. You worry about your health, but you check out all right physically, so this seems to be more a symptom than a cause of your slump. There are some unresolved issues in your life. One that you seem to be stressing a lot is the fact that your recent change in jobs has means that you don't see much of your old friends anymore. Because you're single, this leaves you, currently, with a rather bleak social life. Another issue—one you find painful and embarrassing—is your struggle to stay young. You don't like facing the fact that you're getting older. A third issue is the way you—to use your own word—"over invest" yourself in work, so much so that when you finish a long-term project, suddenly your life is empty.

CLIENT (pauses): It's painful to hear it all that baldly, but that about sums it up. I've suspected I've got some screwed-up values, but I haven't wanted to stop long enough to take a look at it. Maybe the time has come. I'm hurting enough.

HELPER:: One way of doing this is by taking a look at what a better future would look like.

CLIENT: That sounds interesting, even hopeful. How would we do that?

The counselor's summary hits home—somewhat painfully—and the client draws his own conclusion. Care should be taken

The counselor's summary this time—somewhat painful—and the client draws his own conclusion. Care should be taken not to overwhelm clients with the contents of the summary. And summaries should not be used to “build a case” against a

client. Helping is not a judicial procedure. Perhaps the foregoing summary would have been more effective if the helper had also summarized some of the client's strengths. That would have provided a more positive context.

Get Clients to Provide Summaries

Summaries can be useful when clients do not seem to know where to go next, either in the helping session itself or in a real-world action program. In cases like this helpers can, of course, use probes to help them move on. Summaries, however, have 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. Because this is not meant to test clients, the counselor should provide clients whatever help they need to stitch the summary together.

In another example, the client, who has lost her job and her boyfriend because of her alcohol-induced outbreaks of anger, has been talking about “not being able to stick to the program.” The counselor asks her to summarize what she has been doing and the obstacles she has faced. 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, my plan looked like a snap. But it seems that I don't live on paper.” The client then uses the counselor to help her take a couple of steps back. She begins to review goals, plans, obstacles, and execution.

Review the Use of Summaries and Probes in the Case of Marcus and Andrea

We share the following example that involves, a helper, Marcus, who is working with a woman, Andrea, a woman with schizophrenia, to demonstrate that the tenets of this book are applicable in many settings, with a wide variety of individuals. The problem management framework and its components are also useful for those who have significant, complex issues—the power of the basics still apply. Marcus works on an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team that is designed to provide comprehensive treatment tailored to individuals with severe mental illness who have significant difficulty with everyday functioning (e.g., obtaining housing, employment, and basic self-care). ACT is designed to help people live independently, to reduce hospital readmission rates, and to simply improve the lives of their clients. Marcus has a caseload and makes home visits, meeting with his clients wherever he can, including in his car.

Marcus's work is challenging. Most of his clients have significant psychotic disorders including schizophrenia. One of his clients, Andrea, has auditory hallucinations that persist despite her medication. Andrea likes Marcus. He listens to her and always does whatever he can to help her manage her life. It took a long time to build their relationship because Andrea's history includes having bad relationships in general, and having mental health professionals who did not care, or even worse, did not treat her as fully human. Marcus does all the right things. As a result, Marcus and Andrea have a good working relationship. Marcus has earned the right to give input, to share his perspective because Andrea knows he will listen and value her input. Although Andrea struggles, she has done better recently than she has in several years. She is now living independently and even has her own apartment. The ACT team and Marcus are part of this success. In the following exchange, he helps Andrea address an issue regarding a recurrent auditory hallucination she is having. She hears a male voice who claims to be a military commander (Andrea briefly served in the military). The voice is telling her to get a grenade to throw into oncoming traffic outside of her house. Marcus uses probes and summarizing as part of a reality testing strategy.

MARCUS: Andrea, if you can, give me the details of what you are experiencing.

ANDREA: (loudly and fast) I keep hearing this big booming voice tell me to get a grenade and throw it into traffic outside of my apartment. That he is my military commander and that I have to follow orders to protect the infantry. It's freaking me out, it's just not right!

MARCUS: (being deliberately calm) I am right here with you. That sounds frightening. Is there anything else you can tell me?

ANDREA: (a little calmer but still anxious) His ... his voice is so scary! I have no idea why he would keep telling me that. He keeps saying I have to “protect the infantry” and that I have to do it “before more die.”

MARCUS: I wonder what he means when he says he's in the military.

ANDREA: He says he is in the Army and that he is a captain. Not sure what else.

In this brief exchange, you can see that Marcus does not directly challenge the reality of what Andrea is sharing. He has learned that doing so shuts down any collaborative work. He is not overly reactive—plus Andrea has never acted on the

voices she hears. Instead, he tries to understand without colluding with her. His probes indicate a desire to understand the details of Andrea's hallucination. He has also learned that by doing this he can often find a piece of information that may not square with Andrea's reality. Marcus also has some military knowledge because his father was in the Army. For instance, he knows that a captain in the Army would not refer to himself as a "military commander." He also knows that Andrea will know that orders must go through a proper chain of command. Will the voice she is hearing know this chain of command? We pick up below with Marcus summarizing their time together after Andrea has taken the conversation off-course to complain about her neighbors. Andrea has a habit of being tangential.

MARCUS: Let me stop and interrupt you for a second. No doubt neighbors can be annoying. However, I want to go back and have you help me understand what you told me earlier. During the past week, you have heard, almost every day, a voice ordering you to throw a grenade into traffic. The voice says he is a captain in the Army. I know it is stressful for you to talk about this, but do I have it right?

ANDREA: That's right. I don't want to do it, but he won't leave alone and keeps telling me I am costing people their lives.

MARCUS: That does sound heavy. Are you hearing his voice right now?

ANDREA: Yep ... I can hardly stand it!

MARCUS: I'm sorry, Andrea. But I have an idea. I was wondering though, with your knowledge of the Army, would there be a chain of command for an order such as that?

ANDREA: Of course. A captain receives orders like everyone else and on up the chain. Anyone in the military knows this.

MARCUS: Do you think this captain knows this, where he got his orders?

ANDREA: He has to know.

MARCUS: What if he doesn't? Maybe you could ask him.

ANDREA: (eyes lighting up) Means he's phony baloney. I am willing to try anything. It is worth a try. (She immediately gets up and walks to a corner of the room and asks him out loud about the chain of command for the order he is giving.)

MARCUS: (waits patiently for a few minutes then interjects) Well, did you learn anything?

ANDREA: He's a phony. He didn't know squat! I should have known....

MARCUS: Known what?

ANDREA: Known that it wasn't real. I can just ignore it. Just wish the voice would shut up.

MARCUS: That is good to know at least you don't have to listen to it.

They go on to discuss what she learned about this voice. They also discuss ways of telling whether other voices are real or not. Andrea is getting better at this; she is learning to question the voices. Again, you can see that Marcus uses probes to help Andrea explore opportunities for checking out reality. Marcus does not doubt she is hearing things, but uses probes to help her challenge the authority of these voices. Once she learns that a "voice" is just noise, it loses its power.

MARCUS: You're finding ways of handling these voices, Andrea, aren't you! You're learning how to challenge and outsmart them.

ANDREA: (Grinning). I am pretty awesome, huh? Hahaha. Couldn't do it without my shrink though ... I try to keep learning.

MARCUS: You do seem to be learning about yourself. What do you think you have learned?

ANDREA: Other than I am awesome? That the things I hear, as scary as they are, I can fight back with my smarts. Just because I hear something doesn't necessarily mean anything. I don't have to just freak out. Be calm and come up with a plan.

MARCUS: That sounds like real learning!

Marcus used several probes to keep Andrea on-task and moving forward. Probes helped provide Andrea with the structure she needs to describe her experience and tell her story. The summaries also helped keep her see and own her success.

Come to Grips with the Shadow Side of Communication Skills LO 6.4

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Up to this point we have been dealing with basic communication skills. In Chapter 7, we will consider advanced communication skills and processes dealing with helping clients move beyond blind spots to the kind of new perspectives

that lead to life-enhancing outcomes and the actions needed to get there. But first, let's look again at the shadow side of communication skills.

Keep in Mind That Communication Skills Are Necessary but Not Sufficient

Some training programs and helpers tend to overidentify the helping process with communication skills—that is, with communication tools, critical tools though they might be. So 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 that make a difference in clients' lives.

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 socialemotional reeducation and still shortchange your clients, because they need more than that. Some who overestimate the value of communication skills tend to see a skill such as responding with empathy as some kind of “magic bullet.” Others overestimate the value of information gathering.

On the other hand, it strikes us that the helping professions do not promote the importance of communication skills. Many programs have no courses in communication skills. And we practically never run into research articles on communication skills. This could be related to what is going on in the social media. Communication means smartphones, Facebook, Instagram, and texting. What is happening to face-to-face communication?

Distinguish between the Helping Relationship and Helping Technologies

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 treatment manuals, suffices. 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 (Egan) spent ten days in a hospital (an eternity in these days of managed care). The doctors, nurses, and interns were magnificent in addressing my medical needs. But the psychological needs that sprang from my anxiety about my illness were not addressed at all. Unfortunately, my anxieties were often expressed through physical symptoms. Then those symptoms were treated medically. Out of frustration, I asked the young doctor who was debriefing me about the staffing conference in which my case was reviewed, “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?’” The resident said, “No, we don’t have time.” Don’t get me wrong. These were dedicated, generous people who had my physical interests at heart. But they ignored many of my psychological needs. Having healthcare psychologists involved in such staffing sessions is a step in the right direction. I am glad to say that in more recent visits to the same medical center I had startlingly different experiences. It was obvious that the medical profession’s relatively new focus on relationships skills had become part of the center’s culture. Therapy demands both science and art. The helping professions currently focus mostly on science. Art without science is feeble. Science without art is futile.

Find Ways of Developing Proficiency in 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 these “soft” skills should be learned easily and fail to put in the kind of hard work and practice that makes them “fluent” in them. Doing the exercises in communication-skills manuals and practicing these skills in training groups can help, but that is not enough to make these skills second nature. The exercises in tuning in, listening, processing, sharing highlights, and probing that are trotted out, as it were, for helping encounters are likely to have a hollow ring to them. These skills must become part of your everyday communication style and stem from a commitment to empathic relationships.

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 so difficult, but because they are relatively rare in conversations. Take responding with empathy. Listen to the conversations around you. If you were to use an unobtrusive counter, clicking a button every time you heard someone engage in an empathic response, you might go days without a click. But you can make empathic responding a reality in your

engage in an empathic response, you might go days without a click. But you can make empathic responding a reality in your own life. And those who interact with you will often notice the difference. They probably will not call it empathy. 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, usually in the form of questions, in everyday conversations. People are much more comfortable asking questions than providing understanding. However, many of these probes tend to be aimless. Worse, many will be disguised criticisms. "Why on earth did you do that?" Learning how to integrate purposeful probes with empathy demands practice in everyday life. Life is your lab. Every conversation is an opportunity.

These skills have a place in all the human transactions of life, including business transactions. When businesses are asked what competencies they want to see in job applicants, especially for managerial positions, communication and relationship-building skills are inevitably at or near the top of the list. 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 them some months after the training sessions. He had been one of the more notable resisters in one of the training groups. He said, "I owe you this call." "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, a man whose company was dissatisfied with its current audit firm and looking for a new one. During the interview, the account executive 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.

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CHAPTER 7

Help Clients Challenge Themselves: From New Perspectives to New Behavior

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- (7.1 **Understand the Basic Concept of Self-Challenge**
 - Identify the Goals of Challenging
 - Help Clients Target Areas for Self-Challenge
- (7.2 **Invite Clients to Challenge Their Blind Spots**
 - Help Clients Identify Different Kinds of Unawareness
 - Explore Dysfunctional Awareness: Knowing, but Not Caring
- (7.3 **Develop Specific Skills for Helping Clients Challenge Their Blind Spots**
 - Provide Reality-Based Advanced Empathy When It Adds Value
 - Help Clients Get the Information They Need Even When It Is Challenging
 - Use Prudent Helper Self-Disclosure, but Sparingly
 - Be Careful in Making Suggestions and Giving Recommendations
 - Be Slow to Move to Confrontation
 - Find Ways to Provide Encouragement
- (7.4 **Follow Guidelines for Effective Invitations to Self-Challenge**
 - Earn the Right to Invite Clients to Challenge Themselves
 - Keep the Goals of Invitations to Client Self-Challenge in Mind
 - Do Not Force Clients into Decisions, but Do Provide Choice Structure
 - Be Tentative but Not Apologetic in the Way You Invite Clients to Self-Challenge
 - Help Clients Make Their Self-Challenges Clear and Specific
 - Invite Clients to Challenge Unused Strengths Rather than Weaknesses
 - Help Clients Build on Their Successes
- (7.5 **Avoid Shadow-Side Blocks to Challenge**
 - Avoid the "Mum Effect"
 - Recognize Helper Excuses for Not Inviting Clients to Challenge Themselves