

Nonverbal Messages

Social workers must be verbally and nonverbally responsive to clients. There are many ways that the social worker can communicate concern, caring, and involvement with the client nonverbally. Most importantly, be genuine and not mechanical (or simply going through the motions) in your interactions. Attending behaviors include **tone of voice**, eye contact, **body positioning**, head movements and a warm smile. **Furthering responses**, statements such as “please go on” or “tell me more about what happened,” and mirroring the client’s emotional/facial responses are also components of this skill (Cormier, Nurnus, & Osborn, 2011). It is important for the client to feel listened to and valued. If a client senses a genuine interest on the social worker’s part, he or she will be more open. In order to convey sensitivity to cultural variations and communication patterns, the social worker must show openness and respect for each person’s uniqueness (Cormier & Cormier, 2011). The social worker’s presence, being fully there and available, is instrumental in establishing and developing the helping relationship.

Body Positioning and Spatial Considerations

Body positioning is what we communicate through hand gestures, leaning in, facing our clients, and maintaining a relaxed and approachable stance and are ways of conveying “I’m here with you; you have my undivided attention.”

When considering the location of an interview, whether it is in your office, in the client’s kitchen, or at the park, minimizing environmental distractions is also a part of attending. Be sure that the space is private enough to ensure client confidentiality. For example, in a client’s home, it may be appropriate to sit away from the television (if it is on) or in a room outside the normal traffic flow where you can have some privacy. In your office, having telephone calls diverted to voice messages or the receptionist can provide uninterrupted time with your client. If you share an office, a Do Not Disturb sign can indicate that you are in session. In a public place, find a remote spot for a private conversation, such as a secluded table in a restaurant or a private room in a public library.

When taking notes during a session, be sure to let the client know what you are writing and the reason for taking notes. Offer a statement such as “I want to be sure that I get all this information down correctly” or “Do you mind if I write a few notes?” But put your pen down and listen, especially when the client is very emotional. Use short-hand or symbols that will jog your memory when writing the finalized case note. Knowing how to adjust your need to document with your need to be fully present is a skill that takes time and practice.

Seating arrangements will depend on the setting and type of the interview. If visiting a client’s home, wait for the client to indicate where to sit. In an office, it is best to place the chairs about three to four feet apart. This distance appears to be the least anxiety provoking for the client (Cormier & Hackney, 2011). Be aware of the client’s need for personal space and respectful by allowing the client to determine the most comfortable distance. Should three to four feet not be enough or too much, allow the client to adjust accordingly. This is of particular concern when working with clients from different

cultural backgrounds. When interacting with children, be sure to position yourself at their level by bending down or sitting at their eye level. Find yourself a comfortable sitting position and relax.

When working with mandatory or potentially aggressive clients, sometimes having a desk between you can provide a physical barrier, as the desk can be viewed as protection between you and your client. A less confrontational arrangement is to sit at the corner of your desk or table, which allows for less intimacy than a shoulder-to-shoulder stance. Although most clients pose no physical threat to the social worker, sitting close to an exit is a sensible strategy. A word of caution, however: familiarity with your client can help you determine if this type of protective measure is needed or if it could serve to alienate the client.

There are some nonverbal distractions that can present barriers to communication, such as the social worker fidgeting, yawning, sitting with arms tightly crossed, gazing out the window, staring at the clock or looking at a watch, looking bored or distracted, checking for text messages on a cell phone (be sure to put your cell phone on airplane mode during the interview), playing with hair or nails, and nervous laughter.

Touch

Touch is also a part of how a social worker uses his or her body to convey interest and to show that you care. However, be aware of the client’s cultural background and past experiences, for example, having been sexually abused as a child and gender-related issues such as touch could be interpreted by the client as a sexual overture. Pointing a finger, hand beckoning, or using other hand gestures can be interpreted as being critical, demeaning, judgmental, and otherwise offensive by the client, depending on his or her cultural norms and lived experiences.

▶ Watch this video to learn more about touch through the words of the instructor. What effect can touch have on a relationship with a client?

When used correctly, touch can be a very powerful way of communicating that “I care, I’m listening, and I’m concerned.” A nonthreatening way to attend to a client who is crying is to offer a tissue, thus responding to the need without actual touch. You can also ask the client if it is all right to touch him or her (e.g., “This must be so hard for you. Is it okay if I give you a hug?”).

▶ Watch Diane touch Mrs. Kira’s shoulder as she is crying and stating softly, “It’s okay.” As you reflect on your own comfort with touch, is this something you would do? If not, how else could you convey that you are fully present?

As you finish reading this section, take time to watch these clips. You will see the attending skills, body positioning, and touch demonstrated. Following each clip, listen to the narration, which provides the context to understand how and why this attending behavior was used as a way to convey interest in each client’s situation.