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Tone of Voice

Tone of voice is another aspect of attending behavior. It is not just the spoken words, but also the way the words are delivered (Cormier & Hackney, 2011; Shestak & Horvath, 2015). Strive for a warm and pleasant tone of voice, as this can add richness to the message. By being verbally expressive, the social worker can mirror or match the client's feelings.

Body Positioning 1

Body Positioning 2

In this video the instructor discusses the tone of voice and how to pace the interview. Why are these considerations so important to a social worker?

In Box 5.1, the social worker matches the tone of voice to the words chosen. Through her soft tone and slow pace, Judith has a chance to cry without feeling judged or rushed. The client thus experiences the social worker's concern at many levels. Be sure to speak clearly but not too loudly, which could frighten the client, or too softly, which can leave your message unheard or misunderstood. It is best to vary your volume, tone, and pitch. Pace your speech patterns, questions, and responses in a way that can convey interest, not boredom. Using a "sing-song voice" may be appropriate when working with children but not with adults.

Watch this clip of James talking with Anthony. How does James's tone of voice change when asking the question, "What about the risks of being associated with a gang?" Listen to James as he reflects a tone of voice that indicates the repetition of Anthony's life in the future as he says, "So five, ten years from now, you still see yourself in the same gang, doing the same old things." Describe how you would have reacted to his questions if you were Anthony.

Box 5.1 Tone of Voice

In the example below, notice how the intentional use of tone of voice by the social worker affects the meaning and the message of the spoken words.

Social Worker: You sound really sad (said in a quiet, soft tone).

Judith: I am very sad and depressed, I've never felt worse in my life.

Social Worker: It's understandable, you are still in mourning over your son's death (said with an intonation of sadness).

Judith: And I can't stop crying. Whenever I go, I see parents with their children, and I just break down (she starts to tear up).

Social Worker: It's okay (very softly, and hands the client a tissue).

Judith: Thank you. My husband and friends think I should be able to contain all my tears, but they just keep coming.

Social Worker: (Sits silently)

Now that you have finished reading this section, take time to watch this clip. You will see the attending skill of tone of voice demonstrated. Following the 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 the client's situation.

Empathetic Tone of Voice

Silence

Using **silence** appropriately can be a very effective way to communicate with clients; however, there may be some anxieties about silence in an interview. For example, as the social worker, you assume that you are not doing an adequate job if there is a lull in the conversation; therefore, you might jump in too quickly and try to fill in the gaps or "rescue" the client. In order to keep the conversation flowing, the social worker continues to ask a series of questions or moves to a topic that might be less threatening to the client. Resist the urge to fill every silence with a question or response. Conversely, if the silence continues and the client is becoming uncomfortable (squirming in his or her seat or looking to you directly for assistance), interrupting the silence can be useful. In this instance, the social worker may comment on the possible meaning of the silence: "You seem to be struggling with this issue. I am sensing you need to slow down the pace," or you can acknowledge the silence and then ask an appropriate question: "You are so quiet; I wonder if part of your silence relates to all the struggles you feel inside?"

Watch this video and listen to the instructor talk about silence. How is silence an important part of the interviewing process?

According to Shebbi (2007), there are six types of silence:

- Thinking—client needs time to process information and respond.
- Confused and unsure about what to say or do—client doesn't know what is expected and therefore may become anxious. Here, the social worker may need to interrupt the silence and clarify the question, expectation, or direction.
- Encountering painful feelings—client needs space to feel and experience pain and anxiety.
- Dealing with issues of trust—client is reluctant and self-protective; may be involuntary.
- Quiet by nature—client is quiet by nature and prefers other ways of communicating, such as through art or journaling.
- Reached closure on a particular point—client has nothing more to say on the topic or idea.