

Improving Responding Communications Skills

Prepared By Jim Messina, Ph.D., CCMHC, NCC, DCMHS

Assistant Professor, Troy University Tampa Bay Site

This topic available on www.coping.us

What are effective responses for healthy helper-helpee communication?

- Effective responses for healthy helper-helpee communication are those perceived as being empathetic, caring, warm, and thoughtful.
- These eight responses are listed in the order of most effective to least effective:
 1. Understanding
 2. Clarification
 3. Self Disclosure
 4. Questioning
 5. Information Giving
 6. Reassurance
 7. Analytical
 8. Advice Giving
- Remember, however, that each of these responses could be effective depending on the context in which it was used.
- Study each response, including the examples.
- Which responses would be most likely to create healthy interpersonal helper-helpee relationships?

Understanding

An understanding response is most likely to create a climate where honest, frank communication can occur. It is a feelings-oriented response which conveys sensitivity and understanding. Strong negative feelings can become a barrier to communication; this response can diminish those feelings. Understanding is empathy, i.e., accurately tuning in to what the other person is feeling at the time. It implies listening beyond the words and reflecting the feelings.

Examples of Understanding responses:

- You're feeling discouraged and wonder what's the use.
- You're offended and angry.
- You're excited over your new assignment.
- You seem pleased to have been selected.

By focusing on others' feelings you are recognizing them as individuals, persons worthy of your concern. This type of response can reduce hostile feelings in normal people. It can also be used with people when they are over-emotional, crying, fearful, etc., to get beyond those feelings, or reactions.

Clarification

The clarification response indicates your intent to comprehend what the other is saying or to identify the most significant feelings that are emerging. It indicates that what others are saying is important and you are checking it out to ensure your perceptions. This can be done in several ways: echoing the last few words spoken, summarizing the points that seem most relevant, or paraphrasing. A response of this nature can be followed profitably by a period of silence. This gives the others a chance to draw thoughts together or to correct your impression. Clarification responses reinforce your desire to see from the other's point of view.

Examples of Clarification responses:

- I gather that you were able to manage your married life before your baby was born.
- You seem to be saying that you were happier in California and that you would like to go back there.
- Let's see, what you want to do is find a more challenging job?
- If I hear you correctly, you are saying that you could devise a better way of doing this.

This response is useful in reducing hostility. It not only encourages the others to explain more fully, but also serves to focus the discussion, especially when followed by silence on your part. It gives the others a chance to draw their thoughts together and to take responsibility for coming up with their own ideas. Another use for clarification responses is to stall for time to think of a more appropriate response.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure shows your attempts to give others insight into who you are. It is sharing something about yourself that relates directly to the conversation: your personal beliefs, attitudes, values, or an event from your past. Self-disclosure can reduce anxiety by reassuring others that they are not alone in their feelings or fears.

Examples of Self-disclosure responses:

- When we had our son the doctor treated us that way, too!
- I have always believed that it was better to keep my mouth shut when my parents were fighting.
- Like you, I never felt as if anyone accepted me for the way I was.
- When I was younger kids always made fun of my weight, the clothes I wore; I know what it is like to stand out in a crowd.

Self-disclosure is useful in connecting with another person who has similar problems or life concerns. In helping relationships this lets the helpees know that they have come to the right place, that there are people here who have experienced similar problems. Over-use of this response is not helpful because it focuses attention on the wrong person. It can be viewed as an attention-getting device. Use sparingly for the best effect.

Questioning

Like it sounds, the question response seeks to elicit information. It allows others to develop a point. Open questions focus on the others' general situation, thoughts, reactions, and feelings. They tend to promote communication. Closed questions focus on specific facts or aspects of the others situation, generally evoking yes or no answers.

Examples of Questioning responses:

- Do you get along well with your boss? (closed)
- Can you tell me about your boss? (open)
- Do you like the new house? (closed)
- What do you like about the new house? (open)
- Is this confusing you? (closed)
- What is it that's confusing you? (open)

Open questions are recommended for exploring a broad topic. Closed questions can be interspersed to get to specific facts or can be used to cut off long, irrelevant explanations. In either case, listening to the answer, both what is said and what is left unsaid, is vital to the questioning process. Caution is needed with questions beginning with why. They pressure the other for an explanation and can cause resentment. Why questions can seem to express disapproval, being perceived as a cut-down or criticism.

Information Giving

Information giving involves relating facts in an objective manner without judgment or evaluation. It leaves the other person free to accept or reject the facts. It allows the other to take responsibility for using the information. This response is useful in giving both positive and negative feedback (confrontation). The others relate only to what has actually occurred and the effect that this has had. Words such as always, never, should, ought, are only used in setting limits. (The facts about what must or must not be done, time frames, and limitations.)

Examples of Information giving responses:

- These sessions might take up to 12 weeks and but they will hopefully meet your needs.
- Children at every level need touching and nurturing to develop self-worth.
- The support group can be used to meet others dealing with similar problems.

Responding to others' feelings with an information response increases the chances of their respecting and following the limits suggested.

Reassurance

Reassurance responses reduce anxiety, diffuse intense feelings, and express confidence. They provide a pat on the back, but imply that certain feelings or thoughts should be dismissed as being normal or common. This response does not foster a relationship because it tends to discount people's problems. Clichés fall into this category. Reassurance is often used by people who come upon a situation that is out of their realm of experience; they don't know what to do or say, and they may be embarrassed.?

Examples or Reassurance responses:

- Don't worry. Other people have made it; so will you.
- Things may look bad now, but it will be OK in the morning.
- You are not really fat.
- Welcome to the "new normal" post disaster lifestyle.
- Hang in there. Disappointment is a normal feeling.
- This response could be reworded into an understanding, clarifying or information-giving response to be more effective. Used as an expression of sympathy in conjunction with other responses can be helpful. For example, instead of "You will manage," substitute "You have handled this situation before. Relax and use your best judgment. Do what you feel is right for you" (information giving) and I have confidence in you (reassurance).

Analytical

The intent of the analytical response is to analyze, explain, or interpret the other person's behavior and feelings. It goes beyond whatever the other has said to explain or connect ideas and events. Unlike clarification, this response adds something from your own thoughts, feelings, values, etc. It implies that you are wise, you know more than the other person. Under most circumstances the analytical response leads to resentment in others.

Examples of Analytic responses:

- The reason you are having so much trouble with him is that he reminds you of your father whom you hate.
- You often come to our appointments late because you really don't feel comfortable here.
- You see her as an authority figure; that is why you can't relate to her.
- You are lonely because you are afraid to risk getting involved with people.

The analytical response is more appropriate for therapists where there is an ongoing counseling relationship and where the patient needs to become aware of certain behavior or reaction patterns. Even then it sometimes works better to use an information-giving response. Analytical is a poor response to use in confronting a person with behavior of which they need to change.

Advice Giving

Advice giving is usually unproductive. It implies that you are in a position to know the reasons for the other persons' problems, and what they ought, must, or should do about them. You are, thus, judging the goodness, appropriateness, effectiveness, or correctness of the others' actions. Others are being measured by your personal value system and are found somehow lacking. This is a process of blaming others for their own problems.

Examples of Advice-giving responses:

- If I were you, I'd write to him and ask him to send you something for the kids. You should get a divorce, it's the only answer to your marital problems.
- Instead of arguing, you should try to see the other person's viewpoint.
- You shouldn't say things like that.

Telling people what to do takes away their responsibility for decisions and problem solving. Advice often arouses resistance and resentment, even when there is outward compliance. Giving advice, even when requested can, foster dependency. Reword advice into an information-giving response or a question.

How can empathy be conveyed?

- Responding in a healthy manner means conveying understanding, referred to as empathy
- One effective technique used to convey empathy is reflection, which acts as a mirror to provide feedback.
- Reflection conveys understanding to both the emotional content of what is said and the environmental components (events having an impact on the emotions expressed).
- Being in tune with others provides valuable feedback, which is useful in improving the effectiveness of your communication.
- When others see that what they say and feel is important enough to be listened to, a warm, respectful kindred feeling evolves.
- This affinity contributes to trust unity in the helping relationship and increases task abilities and motivation.
- Also, since you become more sensitive to the others' needs you can respond accordingly.
- Reflection of empathy means responding with intense interest using different words to convey the original meaning.

Example of Reflective Empathy

Other: *I'm really not with this stuff today. All these medical terms you're throwing out are mumbo-jumbo to me, and I couldn't give a damn about them. I know I've gotten a bum deal, and my child has problems.*

You: *Having new words to learn is pretty frustrating and nerve racking, especially when you did not ask for any of this.*

Other: *Yeah, so please help me to understand what I need to do to help him.*

It is important that reflective responses be nonjudgmental. A judgmental response adds a new conclusion, interprets the other persons' behavior as good or bad, or distorts the person's words.

For example:

Other: I don't know ... having a baby just isn't what I expected. I thought it would make life more exciting, that it would really turn me on. But it seems that my family life is a dead end. My husband and I end up sitting around doing nothing. Our marriage is so different now that we have a child.

Poor judgmental reflection: It's too bad you feel stagnated. It could be exciting if you didn't just sit around. (This does not indicate that you heard the speaker; it contradicts the speaker, and is judgmental).

Good nonjudgmental reflection: You're saying that having the baby hasn't given you what you expected: something new and exciting in your marriage.

Tips for responding to others to create a supportive helping relationship

1. Respond in a way that focuses attention on the issues and concerns: clarify inconsistencies and gather facts quickly and unobtrusively.
2. Let the other person know that you are listening and following what is being said. Give an occasional Yes, I see, or Uh-huh.
3. Probe with open-ended statements to gain more information. Use Tell me more about ..., Let's talk about that, or I'm wondering about ... Responding in this manner is usually more effective than using specific who, what, when, where, and why questions.
4. Ask for clarification, e.g., I'm having trouble understanding what you're saying. Is it that ...? or Could you go over that again, please?

Tips for responding to others to create a supportive helping relationship

5. Use understandable words. Listen to the vocabulary of the other person to get a clue to their level of understanding.
6. Try not to preach, blame, or be demanding.
7. Try to avoid straying from the topic.
8. Show understanding and sincerity in your responses, so the other person will feel comfortable discussing additional information.

Tips for responding to others to create a supportive helping relationship

9. Try not to talk excessively about yourself. Keep self-disclosure to a minimum.
10. Give responses appropriate for the age, sex, and emotional state of the other person.
11. Avoid responses that put you on the defensive. I'm sorry, I really didn't mean that is a bad approach.
12. Be comfortable with silence. Don't feel that silence needs to be filled with talk. Don't do all the talking.

Tips for responding to others to create a supportive helping relationship

13. Try to remain neutral and nonjudgmental in your response to actions, comments, or conditions you find antagonizing, shocking, or hostile.
14. If you become tangential (straying from the topic) try to refocus the discussion.
15. If people become emotional and cry, allow them to cry. Show respect. Don't stop them, but try to make them feel as comfortable as possible while they are crying.
16. Use responsive body language: make eye contact, lean forward.