**PRACTICUM READING: LISTENING AND HELPING SKILLS**

Source: Okun, B. (1987). *Effective Helping* (3rd ed., pp. 48-83). Monterey, CA: Brooks Cole.

In every Practicum setting, Practicum students need basic communication skills, for listening and responding helpfully to clients and others. This reading, based on excerpts from a helping skills textbook, gives you a useful set of things to notice and optional responses for you to use.

For this reading, instead of the usual reaction paper, complete the form on pages 5-6 of this document. Type your answers on this form and then submit ONLY those final two pages (5-6) in a document to the BOLT dropbox.

**Nonverbal Communication**

Nonverbal communication is a key aspect of listening, especially for emotional (affective) messages. Here are some nonverbal things to look for when clients communicate with you.

Note: the meaning of all of these depends on the person, context (situation), and topic of discussion. There is no magic guide to the meaning of a nonverbal action. Don’t be overconfident of your interpretation of a nonverbal action; look for other cues or actions to check your interpretation.

**Eyes:** steady eye contact or lack of it, downcast eyes\*,  
crying or tearfulness, blinking, twitching,   
eyes widely open or squinting, raised or lowered eyebrows,   
seeming fearful, angry, hurt, sad, happy, embarrassed, surprised, or other emotion.

**Facial Expression:** animated, bland, blushing, pale, frowning, smiling, rigid, relaxed,  
seeming fearful, angry, hurt, sad, happy, embarrassed, surprised, or other emotion.

**Voice:** fast, slow, loud, quiet;   
interrupting, talking a lot, asking questions;   
seeming uncertain, confident, angry, sad, nervous, etc.

**Body:** slouching, tense, fidgeting, relaxed, gestures, touching, learning toward you or away.

\*The meaning of eye contact and downcast eyes differs greatly by culture. In Western (European-based) cultures, a lot of eye contact is expected. Listeners may feel that person who doesn’t make eye contact may not be telling the truth or may feel ashamed. However, in many other cultures, lack of eye contact and downcast eyes are signs of respect for authority. For instance, a Hispanic child may look down in the presence of a teacher, school counselor, police officer, or other authority figure. That is a sign of respect, and does not necessarily communicate anything about the child’s emotions or the truthfulness of what the child says.

**Exercise:** Think about one instance in your personal, academic or work life, when nonverbal cues were essential to your own understanding a person or a problem. What specific nonverbal cues were important (whether on the lists above or not)?

**Verbal Communication of Emotions**

Humans also communicate emotions by the words we choose. Listening for feelings involves both listening closely to words and listening/watching for nonverbal cues. However, verbal cues can be as difficult to interpret as nonverbal cues. Don’t be overconfident of your interpretation of a word or phrase; look for other cues or actions to check your interpretation.

**Exercise:** For each statement below, what do you think is the underlying emotion? (Note: There may be more than one likely answer, and of course you are working without any nonverbal cues or other details).

(Cover the section at the bottom of the page while you think about each of these statements.)

Statements:

1. I graduated at the top of my class, and I know this stuff cold. My grade doesn’t reflect that.
2. Two boys were picking on me and shoving me on my way home yesterday.
3. Len is so busy that he never comes home for dinner anymore.
4. Anne never really talks to me anymore.
5. My husband is out of work, and I don’t know how we will pay our rent next month.
6. All children steal at my son’s age, don’t you think?
7. Will you see me again next week?
8. Coming to talk with you doesn’t seem to be working. I still don’t know what to do.
9. Dr. Knowitall is a lousy teacher. He doesn’t know how to explain things.
10. Why should I stay in school? I don’t know what to do.

(After you finish all 10 items, uncover the section below.)

Consider the emotions listed there for each statement, and see if you can think of other emotions that may be involved.

1. Pride, anger, defensiveness, not used to receiving a lower grade, fear of being unsuccessful in school now.
2. Fear, anxiety.
3. Feelings about Len: frustration, anger, sympathy, impatience. Feelings about self: helplessness.
4. Feeling distant, left out, abandoned, lonely, angry, helpless.
5. Fear, anxiety, helplessness.
6. Defensiveness, embarrassment, shame.
7. Anxiety, dependence on counselor, fear of abandonment.
8. Confusion, fear, anxiety, frustration.
9. Frustration, anger at Dr. Knowitall, impatience with self, helplessness.
10. Confusion, fear, anxiety, frustration.

**Seven Verbal Response Skills**

What can you say to a client who needs your help?

You have some life experiences that can help you decide. In other words, you have developed some verbal response skills already. Your Practicum will provide you opportunities to develop your skills further.

Read and think about the list below, and make sure you understand each skill. Then consider your own level of ability for each skill.

**Paraphrasing:** Repeating in your own words the most important part of the client’s statement. This communicates that you are listening and encourages the client to go on. For instance:  
Client: I had a lousy day today.  
Helper: Things didn’t go well for you.

**Probing:** Asking an open-ended question (that cannot be answered yes or no) to encourage the client to elaborate or explain. Examples: “Tell me more”, “Let’s talk about that”, “I’m wondering about …”, “What is your biggest worry?”, “Tell me about ….”.

**Reflecting:** Reflecting is the most direct, effective way of expressing empathy for the client’s feelings.   
It is related to paraphrasing, but goes beyond that skill. To reflect a client statement, choose a feeling/emotion that the client seems to be having but is ***not*** saying explicitly. Then phrase a statement that mentions the emotion. Be tentative about this -- the purpose of reflecting is to check to see if you understand the emotion correctly. For instance:  
“You’re feeling uncomfortable with him.”  
“You seem angry about how she treats you.”  
“You feel hurt by what he said.”  
“At first you were confident, but now you seem less certain about this.”  
“You seem to resent this.”  
(If a client corrects or disagrees with your choice of words or emotions, that’s good; you can now discuss the emotion that the client feels, in her own words.)

**Clarifying:** Asking a question or making a tentative statement, in order to understand more about something that the client is saying. Reflecting is focused on identifying a single emotion; clarifying is more general and may concern facts, emotions or aspects of the client’s problem.   
Clarifying may take several forms, for instance:  
“I’m having trouble understanding. Do you mean… ?”  
“Sounds to me like your biggest worry is that…”  
“Does it seem that the real issue is… ?”  
“My hunch is that…”  
“It seems like you want to ….”

**Confronting:** This involves giving honest, constructively critical feedback to the client about his/her behavior. The most effective confrontations mention a specific behavior by the client, and tell how it is inappropriate, or how it affects you or comes across to you. For instance:  
“Tom, you said you are angry, but I notice that you are smiling. Can you tell me about that?”  
“Jack, you have been joking and distracting others instead of working together with us. I want you to calm down and help us do this.”  
“Jan, your teasing is annoying me. Please stop now.”  
“Stacy, I know that you are trying to help, but please let Andrea speak for herself.”

**Supporting/Reassuring:** This involves providing emotional support, encouragement, praise, comfort, hope, or similar help to a client. It is most effective when it is truthful and your feelings are genuine. Also, don’t overdo it too intensely or too often; use your feelings as a guide to when it is appropriate. Examples:   
“You are really working hard at this.”   
“You’ve really been through a lot, but you are coping well.”  
“A lot of us here really care about you.”  
“Working with others is a strength for you.”   
(Simply naming a client’s strengths, or having a client name her own strengths, is supportive and a source of hope.)

**Summarizing:** Making a statement that describes an overall topic, theme, or decision that you and the client have discussed together. This is more general than clarifying. It helps end a conversation or change topics. For instance:  
“We have talked over some of your options, which are …. Do you want to think about them, and see me again about your decision?”  
“I think you are making progress in understanding your own feelings about this. We can discuss them some more tomorrow.”  
“I think we both understand that … is your most important challenge now. Do you agree?”  
“You seem ready to make this decision.”

**Exercise:**

For each skill, what is your level of ability now?

Think about how you can practice *two* of these skills in your Practicum setting, to strengthen your ability to use those skills.

Don’t try to master all eight of these skills all at once. Choose one or two skills to work on during your Practicum. Helping professionals with years of experience still find skills they need to strengthen.

**A BRIEF GUIDE TO LISTENING AND HELPING SKILLS:**

**REACTION PAPER FORM**

Complete this form (both pages) instead of the usual reaction paper for this reading. Type your answers on this form, save a copy with just these final two pages of the document and turn the completed assignment in to Dr. Leitzel via the BOLT dropbox.

Your name:

**1.** Type a one-paragraph description of at least one nonverbal action that you think you need to pay increased attention to in your Practicum. (If you wish, you may choose something not mentioned in this reading.) Include at least one sentence about why this specific nonverbal cue is important and what emotion(s) it may communicate.

[Type paragraph here. Use up to ten lines.]

1. Type a good example of the indicated Verbal Response Skill for each example below. Type one or two lines per response.
2. From a student in a new school or a person in a new treatment center: “I’m not sure that I can handle being in this place. This is nothing like where I was before.”  
   Type a **Reflecting** response:
3. You are leading a group discussion that is part of the treatment approach in your Practicum setting. There is a group rule that members are not to interrupt each other in group. Marty, a group member, often interrupts, and just did so again.  
   Type a **Confronting** response:
4. “I always tell Jim not to argue with his father. The old man has a terrible temper.”  
   Type a **Probing** response:
5. From a teenager in a treatment center: “I’ve really screwed up my life to end up here. I have lots of feelings.”  
   Type a **Reflecting** response:

[Note: Complete the next page also.]

1. Choose **two** of the Seven Verbal Response Skills to work on strengthening for yourself during your Practicum. Type a paragraph on each skill below. In each paragraph, describe your current level of ability on this skill, and how you could strengthen this skill by practicing it during your Practicum.