

[4TH EDITION]

**COMMUNICATION
SKILLS IN HEALTH
AND SOCIAL CARE**

[BERNARD MOSS]



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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
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SAGE Publications Inc.
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Editorial assistant: Lucy Dang
Production editor: Katie Forsythe
Marketing manager: Camille Richmond
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ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is a term which has entered the common parlance of people-work, not least through the seminal works of Rogers (1951), Egan (2013) and Truax and Carkhuff (2007), each of whom emphasised the importance of the personal relationship between the counsellor/worker and the ‘client’ in a helping relationship. They argued that it is only when a person seeking help believes that they are being accepted for who they are, without being put down or being judged, that any real progress towards change can be achieved. Upon these foundations, the increasingly complex disciplines of counselling and other people-work disciplines have been built (Nelson-Jones, 2014).

The roots of this approach run deep within western philosophy, and also draw particular strength from the monotheistic traditions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, where the uniqueness of each individual and their accountability to a divine creator is a central tenet of faith. In some ways the current, postmodern fascination with spirituality is highlighting the same point, that each individual seeks their own deep sense of meaning and purpose, which deserves to be respected and valued by others.

Counselling, of course, is a discrete discipline, even though some of its skills are used by other professional groups. Counselling is not social work, any more than social work is counselling. But the key tenet of acceptance, so vital to counselling, has also become part of the value base and codes of conduct not only of social work but of many other helping professions. It emphasises the importance and uniqueness of each and every person with whom the professional worker comes into contact, and their right to expect to be treated with dignity and respect.

All of this, however, is easier said than done. The big question for any worker is how to put this basic tenet of a professional value base into practice when faced with people whose behaviour is oppressive, abusing and damaging to others. Professional people-workers are called upon daily to work with people whose lifestyles blatantly contradict this value base; their victims testify to their inhumanity. The one thing that acceptance is *not* is any sense of approval for behaviour that demeans and damages others. It is part of the responsibility of people-work professionals to protect those who are vulnerable and at risk in society, and this necessarily involves challenging those who behave oppressively towards others.

It is this tension between these two aspects of our professional value base – acceptance of each individual as unique and precious, and the protection of the vulnerable from abuse – which places this theme firmly in the arena of communication skills. It is arguably one of the most difficult skills to develop for any worker, not least because our sense of moral outrage at some people’s behaviour will seep into our dealings with them, however scrupulous we are with the language we use in our interviews and discussions.

Activity 1

To illustrate this point, imagine for a moment you have to interview or nurse someone who has committed a heinous offence against a vulnerable child or older person. The graphic details of their behaviour are outlined in your file and you feel physically sickened that someone could do this sort of thing to another human being. Just spend a few moments by yourself or with others whom you trust, quietly imagining yourself face to face with this person, and identify the feelings which are churning around inside you, and what you would like to do to them if you had them alone in a dark alley. It could, after all, have been your child, your parent or grandparent.

And now get in touch with how these feelings are manifesting themselves in how you are sitting – your facial expressions, the tenseness of your body language – how your fists so easily become clenched – ‘and now I am supposed to accept this person? You must be joking!’

If you have attempted this activity honestly, you will find yourself firmly in this tension-filled territory which has already been described. Your professional value base insists that you treat this individual with dignity and respect; your own humanity rebels against what they have done. It is precisely because of this tension, however, that codes of conduct have been drawn up to ensure that we do not allow our own feelings and (let it be said) our prejudices to get in the way of the tasks which society expects of us. The significance of the activity you have just completed is its power to remind you how strong your feelings can be, and to make the point that, whether you like it or not, those feelings will be communicated to a greater or lesser extent to the person with whom you are seeking to work. In other words, you may be able to use all the appropriate words in your interview but the high emotions of how you are *really* feeling will seep out rather like a bad smell, and will pervade and strongly influence how the other person responds. They will then respond not so much to your words but to your non-verbal communication, and that gives them a very clear message: you are *not* accepted.

WAYS FORWARD

The discussion so far has aimed at uncovering, as honestly as we can, the way we sometimes feel about those whom we are seeking to help or look after. The following pointers to best practice are offered to help you begin to deal with this particularly difficult area.

Supervision and preparation

If you know you are going to have to deal with a situation that stirs up strong feelings in you, it is imperative that you prepare properly. This includes talking through with a trusted supervisor, manager, ward sister or practice educator, how you feel about this particular scenario, and being honest about your feelings. You will find, more often than not, that this discussion will help you put things into

perspective and enable you to deal with the person professionally. To know that you have a safe place in which to deal with *your* feelings will enable you to provide a safe place for the other person to deal with theirs. It also opens up the possibility that your supervisor may feel that someone else should take over responsibility for this case. For example, if it has triggered off within you some deep-seated hurt which cannot be easily resolved, then it would be better for someone else to handle this particular referral.

Accept yourself

Acceptance is not just how you treat other people: it has a dimension to it that involves how you think of yourself. We all have our strengths and our weaknesses; things we are good at and things we struggle with; our personal victories and our individual wounds. The best people-workers are often those who have come to a deep understanding and acceptance of who they are, warts and all, and who reach out to others not from a position of moral superiority, but from their shared humanity. Yes, we may abhor what some people have done to hurt others, but few of us as people-workers have been able to avoid hurting people in our own relationships. The sense of our own frailty and capacity to be unloving and uncaring, however, can be channelled into a more humble approach in our work with others, and help us realise that we all struggle with trying to make a success of our lives.

Remember to practise the basics

Your basic communication skills training is there, not only for you to fall back on but to use as an essential strategy in offering acceptance to another person. The way you introduce yourself; your tone of voice; your non-verbal communication skills; your active listening skills – all are there to be used to help put the person at their ease. They will then begin to feel that this is a space and time for them, so that no matter what they have done they are being listened to and accepted in a respectful and dignified manner.

Be honest

Even if the person you are working with shows no remorse for their actions, you can still legitimately raise with them how many people in society (and by implication you too) feel about how they have behaved. It is perfectly legitimate to be clear with people that their actions have damaged others and that part of your role is to help protect vulnerable people. Importantly, if they can see you as an ally to help them change their behaviour, and begin to realise that in your acceptance of them as an individual you are opening up the possibility of a changed lifestyle, you will have done them an immeasurable service. To demonstrate a belief that the person can change is perhaps one of the most important messages you can ever communicate.

Be focused

As with all people-work, you will need to communicate clearly with the person you are working with why you are involved; how you can agree in partnership with them what needs to be achieved, and how this will be effected; and also what the consequences are likely to be if progress is not achieved. Accepting the *consequences* of a person's behaviour is as important as accepting the person themselves.

CELEBRATE DIVERSITY

So far, the discussion has focused on a particularly sharp set of issues that throw into high relief the tension that is inherent in this theme of acceptance. However, it is important now to widen the context in order to demonstrate its relevance to the whole range of people-work. As already noted, the communication skills aspects of the discussion arise from the value base of our work, which may be characterised by the celebration of diversity.

Diversity is, by definition, a complex theme, but in this context it reflects the multicultural, multi-faith and multi-dimensional aspect of society. If racism, sexism, classism, disablism and homophobia are the shadows cast by oppressive world views, then the positive aspect of this is the celebration of society where people and their chosen world views, lifestyles and various differences are both respected and celebrated as being an enrichment of our communities. As before, it is important that you understand the implications of this value base for people-work. You need to explore your own world view and prejudices in an honest and open way, otherwise you may jeopardise the work you seek to undertake.

Here too, however, there are points of tension for people-work practice. Not every world view may be of equal value; some litmus test has to be applied to make judgements about whether the behaviours towards others which flow from certain world views are deemed to be respectful or oppressive. In exploring these issues, however, the same approach as we outlined above needs to be adopted, and the same communication skills implemented, to demonstrate that acceptance is not an empty theoretical perspective but rather a commitment and an energy which pervades all our communication with others.

Activity 2

Choose an example of an issue that you find difficult to celebrate that reflects diversity in our complex society. Try to identify what it is about this topic that causes you disquiet. Having identified the various issues, invite your supervisor or practice educator to help you role play a scenario where you are seeking to engage with these issues in ways that are respectful and demonstrate the value base of acceptance. After you have done this, see if you can draw up a set of guidelines to help you develop your practice in this area.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This discussion has shown how a topic like acceptance, which is fundamental to the value base of much people-work, pervades every aspect of communication skills. It is not a neat, self-contained concept: indeed, the ease with which it can be defined belies the challenge which is inherent within it for all people-work practice. It raises for you, in all your work, both in the preparation, delivery and evaluation of your engagement with others, the powerful question of whether the person you have been working with really feels accepted as a result of your intervention. There is possibly no greater challenge.

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[RELATED CONCEPTS] active listening; anti-discriminatory practice; counselling; motivational interviewing; non-verbal communication; reflective practice; spirituality.

[ENGAGING WITH THE PCF] diversity; intervention and skills; knowledge; values and ethics.



Service user snippet

Tom (65), currently serving a prison sentence for child abuse

I was dreading meeting the prison chaplain: I was so ashamed and scared. But without condoning what I had done she seemed really to care about me as me. I can't tell you how great that felt.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening ensures that everything that a person is trying to say is fully received and understood by the listener. This includes attempting to understand not just what the person is saying with their chosen words, but what some of their underlying thoughts and feelings are, which may be conveyed as much by what they do *not* say and by their body language, as by the words they use.

The term ‘active listening’ is frequently used by helping professionals to underline the importance of this activity. It has several layers to it, and it is not merely hearing the words which are being spoken.

Active listening is, of course, easier said than done, which is why such an emphasis is laid upon it as a core communication skill. To illustrate its complexity, undertake the following activity either by yourself, with a companion or in a small group.

Activity 1

See how many different tones of voice you can use in saying the words ‘Can I help you?’ You will quickly discover that some tones of voice can contradict the words you are using, just as a very defensive body posture can have a similar effect.

This is what is sometimes called the ‘music behind the words’ – and it is the music which conveys the *real* meaning of what is being communicated. If the listener takes the words simply at face value, the real meaning could be ignored.

Of course, you may speculate why this should be so, and the reason may vary from person to person. What Activity 1 illustrates is that communication is a complex activity, and that if you are going to work successfully with people, your whole being must be attuned to what is being said.

It goes without saying that in any interaction with someone you are seeking to support, nurse or work with, you need to be clear about what you are trying to do. The listening skills that you need will vary according to the nature of the task. For example, if you are a welfare rights worker doing a benefits check for someone, you will certainly need to adopt a caring, understanding approach throughout, but for much of the interview you will be gathering and interpreting factual information which you need to help you calculate their eligibility for particular benefits. In a similar way, a doctor or nurse may need to elicit crucial information about a

patient's symptoms in order to reach an accurate diagnosis. A social worker or probation officer preparing a court report will need to elicit and interpret information about a person's behaviour. By contrast, a counsellor working with a deeply distressed person following a major loss in their life will be focusing heavily on that person's feelings, and will be exploring a very sensitive aspect of their life, which requires a different set of skills as they seek to explore and develop that person's self-awareness. Someone who is working with people whose relationships are breaking down will use the skills of trying to help each of them understand what the other is saying, and use interpretative skills to a considerable degree to help people who have become deaf to each other to begin to hear each other's 'music' once more.

These examples illustrate the complexity of the listening task. One common theme, however, is the type of questions that can be used in active listening. These are commonly grouped together into two categories: open questions and closed questions.

Open questions are used when you want to help someone 'open up' about themselves, to give you some insights into how they are feeling, or to explore a situation in more depth. They do not allow a straightforward 'yes' or 'no' response, but instead invite the person to talk about the topic. For example:

- Can you tell me how this happened?
- What did your parents think about ...?
- Can you tell me in your own words about ...?
- Why do you think that was?

Some people discourage the use of the 'why?' question as being too threatening; it can put people 'on the spot' and may make conversation more difficult, especially if it assumes that a measure of blaming is implicit or even explicit in the question ('*Why* on earth did you do that?'). But good communication skills are not about slavishly following a set of rules with their 'do's and don'ts': they are about developing your own style, and realising that with sensitivity and appropriate voice tones you can encourage people to open up and share their story with you.

It is your sensitivity that is all-important. Not everyone will feel able to 'open up' easily and share their deep thoughts and feelings. Some need to go step by step, and to be led by the interviewer cautiously until they gain the confidence to go deeper. This is why closed questions also have such an important role to play.

Closed questions invite a straightforward 'yes' or 'no' answer ('Did you hit him?'), and are necessary in gathering factual information in as straightforward a way as possible. Closed questions can give a message to the interviewee that you are in charge, know what you are doing and where you are going, and that they can put their confidence in you.

It is certainly not the case that open questions are good and closed questions bad: that is a gross caricature. Each has its part to play in a well-balanced effective interview, and it is up to you to judge which of them will be most appropriate and effective as the interview unfolds.

BASIC SKILLS

The complexity of active listening is well illustrated by Trevithick (2012: 172), who lists 20 basic skills involved in listening. These are:

- being as open, intuitive, empathetic and self-aware as possible
- maintaining good eye contact
- having an open and attentive body orientation or posture
- paying attention to non-verbal forms of communication and meaning
- allowing for and using silence as a form of communication
- taking up an appropriate physical distance
- picking up and following cues
- being aware of our own distracting mannerisms and behaviour
- avoiding vague, unclear and ambiguous comments
- being aware of the importance of people finding their own words in their own time
- remembering the importance of the setting and the general physical environment
- minimising the possibility of interruptions and distractions
- being sensitive to the overall mood of the interview, including what is not being communicated
- listening for the emotional content of the interview and adapting questions as appropriate
- checking out and seeking feedback wherever possible and appropriate
- being aware of the importance of timing, particularly where strong feelings are concerned
- remembering the importance of tone, particularly in relation to sensitive or painful issues
- avoiding the dangers of preconceptions, stereotyping or labelling, or making premature judgements or evaluations
- remembering to refer to theories that are illuminating and helpful, and also, where appropriate, to explain, in an accessible language, theories that may aid understanding
- being as natural, spontaneous and relaxed as possible.

Put like that, listening skills may seem daunting, even impossible to get completely right. They are a challenge, and it sometimes needs a list like that to remind us that to listen actively can be one of the hardest tasks we ever undertake.

Activity 2

By yourself, with your supervisor or in a small group, go through the 20 skills listed above, and make sure you fully understand them. Try to think of examples to illustrate each one, and explore how you would want to put these into practice yourself.

SUMMARISING

Summarising is a useful skill, which helps to check the pace and progress of an interview. Essentially, this means taking some time out from the actual flow of the interview and trying to put into words the story so far as you perceive it. This serves several useful functions:

- It demonstrates to the interviewee that you have been listening to what they are saying and that you have grasped the main issues clearly.
- It provides the interviewee with an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of your summary and (importantly) to put right any misunderstanding you may have developed.
- It facilitates the process of empathy between you and the interviewee.
- It provides a structured staging post in the interview to take stock and to decide how to move on to the next stage.
- It is also a useful technique to use when the interview 'runs into the sand' and you need to 'get unstuck'.

Obviously, in the course of an interview lasting, say, for an hour, you will not want to use this summarising technique too often: that would become tedious and mechanistic. Perhaps two or three times, including the summary you will want to offer at the very end of the interview, will normally be about right.

PARAPHRASING

This is a similar skill to summarising, but it provides a narrower focus in that you can use it frequently to 'mirror' or reflect back to the interviewee a particular thought, concept or feeling they are trying to express. This skill involves putting into your own words what you think the other person is trying to express. This has several advantages:

- It enables you to show that you have been listening to the interviewee.
- It provides an opportunity for the interviewee to confirm, or adjust, the feedback you have provided.
- It helps to establish empathy.
- It provides an opportunity for the interviewee to see themselves in the 'verbal mirror' you have provided as a stimulus for further reflection.

However, as with all 'techniques', it is important that they are used sensitively and not 'robotically': that would be extremely frustrating and counter-productive. The interviewee may end up feeling that they cannot get it right because you are always changing what they have said into something 'more acceptable to you', and that is the last message you will want to convey. Use the technique, therefore, if you get stuck, or feel that the other person is struggling, or you feel you need their help to understand them better.

CLARIFYING

It will come as no surprise to you to discover that people cannot always easily put into words what they are feeling or what they need to tell you. If you need any confirmation of this statement, look no further than yourself. Think back to an occasion when you were deeply upset or distressed and had to talk to someone. The chances are that all your usual confidence and articulacy somehow drained away, and you were left groping for the words that might express how you felt.

There will be occasions in an interview, therefore, where it is likely that you will not understand what is being said, for whatever reason. The skills of clarifying are important, because you do not want to get to the end of a long complex interview and still feel in the dark about some key issues and facts.

The important thing to remember here is that the interviewee will be doing their very best to communicate clearly, often under difficult circumstances. So you do not want to give out a message that they are ‘making a hash’ of it. Instead, it is important that *you* take responsibility for not fully understanding, and ask them to help you to gain the fuller picture. As is so often the case in interviewing, you need to find a form of words that feels right to you: there is no magic mantra which will always work. But something like the following may be helpful to start you off in your search for your own best approach:

J, you have given me a very clear picture of how upset all this has made you feel. I wonder if you can help me with some of the details which I’m afraid I have not been able to sort out in my own mind yet.

Gosh J, this is a very difficult situation – no wonder you feel so ...; I wonder if you could help me understand a bit better about ‘x’.

J, this is like a jigsaw – you have explained very clearly about ‘x’ and ‘y’, but I need your help please to understand about ‘z’ and how this fits into the overall picture.

J, I wonder if it would help if we put some of the things you have told me up here on the flip chart – it would certainly help me get a better picture.

You might also find that the use of a genogram or an ecomap is a good way of clarifying the situation.

FURTHER ISSUES

There are additional complexities to be taken into account. They may be stated briefly but each of these issues deserves detailed consideration and reflection. The issues are gender, age, race and disability.

Gender

The impact of gender must not be overlooked. For some people, and within certain cultures, it is of great importance that women have the opportunity to talk with a female worker, just as in medical matters many women prefer to have a female GP. Similarly, in some cultures, a man would want to be able to talk things over with a male worker. But even if there are not cultural imperatives to consider, this dimension will always be present, and it is important that, as a worker, you think about what impact this will have upon each professional encounter you experience. There will be occasions when you need to raise this issue specifically with the other person so that it can be appropriately addressed and not fester.

Age

There is no denying that ageism can sometimes undermine a relationship you are trying to develop. For example, a very young worker at the beginning of their career may meet with a much older person who may be tempted to disregard their expertise and potential effectiveness simply on the grounds of age and assumed inexperience. By contrast, a much older worker, when trying to work with a younger person, may find that they represent a parent figure so strongly that the young person ‘puts up the shutters’ and refuses to have anything to do with them. There are no easy ways around this. Sometimes it is a question of how ‘cases’ are allocated within an agency. What is important, however, is that you will need to raise these issues directly and try to talk about the ‘blocks’ that are being put up, in the hope that by airing them they can gradually be removed, and a trusting relationship established. That will be a challenge to your communication skills admittedly, but until the ‘block’ is identified it will not be possible to move forward.

Race

One of the tenets of anti-racist practice is that, ideally, people should be able to have a worker from a similar ethnic background to themselves, to help ensure that they are fully ‘heard’ and that a fully sensitive assessment is made. This involves being aware that for many black and minority ethnic people to go to a predominantly white agency carries the risk of a continuation of racist attitudes and behaviours. However welcoming an agency may try to be with multicultural welcome posters on display, the reality of only being able to offer a white worker can be worrying for a member of a minority ethnic group in this country. It is important to state clearly that this fear or misgiving will have been based on previous experiences of living in a racist community, so the onus must be upon a white worker to acknowledge these issues in a sensitive way, and to check out how best to proceed. There are many examples where this ‘checking out’ has led to a reduction in mistrust and misgivings, and a good working relationship has subsequently been established with

good outcomes. The crucial thing, however, is for white workers to be honest about the issues; to acknowledge that it can be difficult for a predominantly white agency to provide sensitive and appropriate services; and to take the initiative in talking about these issues at the first meeting.

It must also be said, however, that workers from minority ethnic groups can sometimes experience racist behaviour from white people seeking to use the service, and who express resentment that they cannot be seen by a white worker. This calls for strong anti-discriminatory policies by the agency to support all their staff and to make it clear that all members of staff are committed to delivering the best possible service to everyone who needs it. It should also be noted that discriminatory behaviour towards staff should not be tolerated.

Disability

All organisations need to ensure that their services are disability-friendly. This means that those who seek to use the services of the agency must be able to fully access them, and that the agency must also be a disability-friendly employer. There are, of course, some particular challenges, for both staff and users of the service, when working with people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, people who have communication difficulties, or lack of vision. It is important that due consideration is given to these issues so that people are not marginalised and excluded from services.

Activity 3

Spend some time thinking through by yourself, with your supervisor or with a group of colleagues, what the challenges are for communication skills in regard to the four issues outlined above for your particular service or agency.

Language, dialect and culture

One further set of issues deserves to be added to the list of complexities for active listening skills. It is best practice that people who wish to access services should be able to do so in their language of choice. This will mean that, on occasion, you will need to negotiate for a skilled professional interpreter to be present for your interviews, so that information can be accurately exchanged. Your agency should be able to access interpreter services in your area. This includes British Sign Language for people who are Deaf. Somewhat more complicated, however, is the issue of dialects, especially if you are new to an area and are unfamiliar both with the music of the local dialect and some of the words and phrases which, for local people, enrich their sense of identity, but which can significantly disempower a worker seeking to accurately communicate with them. There is no substitute for seeking out some local people who would be willing to spend some time with you, helping you to become

attuned to the dialect and giving you a glossary of common terms which are used. But until you are comfortable, you will need to develop the skill of asking sensitively for explanations and translations, in a way which makes it clear that it is you who are on the learning curve: it is not the other person's fault! There are also important issues to consider around intercultural awareness, and some of the 'messages' that white people, for example, may (however unwittingly) give to members of minority ethnic communities that may imply racist or stereotypical attitudes.

Activity 4

What are the issues around language and dialect in your area? How are you dealing with these? Can you prepare a glossary for new members of staff or students joining your team? Or perhaps make this into a student project?

Activity 5

Read Judy Ryde's (2009) book, *Being White in the Helping Professions*. What are the key themes and messages that need to be taken seriously? Make a list of them and use them as a discussion starter for your next group supervision or team meeting.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Active listening skills are complex, but they are the fundamental bedrock of good practice. They cannot be taken for granted. They need to be worked at, and as we have seen, some of the issues you will need to explore and deal with may be particularly challenging. But without good listening skills, your people-work career will never get past first base.

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[RELATED CONCEPTS] acceptance; ecomaps; empathy; genograms; getting unstuck; interpreters.

[ENGAGING WITH THE PCF] diversity; intervention and skills; professionalism.

Service user snippet

Fran (37), mental health service user

For the first time in my life I felt as if someone had really listened to me and heard the real me inside ... I can't tell you what a relief that was.