

TOUR 2

Preparation for Departure

Building Relationships With Basic Listening Skills

During this tour you will have opportunities to

- Recognize the importance of a helping relationship
- Master basic listening skills
- Learn to ask questions that facilitate professional relationships and change
- Evaluate and improve counselor responses
- Become aware of common mistakes

The process of learning and honing counseling skills is developmental. *Essential skills* (sometimes called core skills, basic skills, or microskills) that are developed on this tour include (a) nonverbal attending, (b) tracking, (c) reflecting content, (d) reflecting affect, (e) clarifying, (f) summarizing, and (g) facilitative questioning.

These skills are, essentially, good communication strategies that help people develop relationships—personal, collegial, and professional. (Appendix A includes columns about these communication skills that we wrote for readers of a local newspaper.)

EXPLORING AUTHENTICITY, RESPECT, EMPATHY, AND ENGAGEMENT



Think about someone with whom you have had conversations during which you felt understood, accepted, and validated. What did or does that person do that enables you to think of him or her in this context?

Typically, responses include such components as (a) she looked at me, (b) he nodded, (c) his facial expressions let me know, (d) he said things so I knew he was listening, and (e) she stopped doing what she was doing and gave me her full attention.

Think a bit further back in history to when you were a child or adolescent to two or three adults with whom you could talk openly and feel understood. What were some of the reasons you identified these adults?



Unfortunately, some children, youth, and adults do not have opportunities for relationships like you may have described. Thus, it is important for professional counselors—in all settings—to offer a qualitatively different relationship in which individuals experience authenticity, respect, unconditional positive regard, empathy, and engagement.

COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP AS THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

Sometimes, practicing basic skills seems tedious, mechanical, and artificial. That being the case, we start with *why* to use them rather than *how* to use them. A variety of empirical studies have resulted in evidence regarding the importance of the counseling relationship (Lambert & Barley, 2001; Norcross, 2010; Wampold, 2001), which is sometimes called a therapeutic alliance. In fact, Michael J. Lambert and Dean E. Barley (2001) contended, “It is imperative that clinicians remember that decades of research consistently demonstrate that relationship factors correlate more highly with client outcomes than do specialized treatment techniques” (p. 359). Regardless of the terminology, a strong relationship with clients is essential for productive work with children, youth, and adults.

Our professional histories reflect diverse beliefs regarding counseling relationships. For example, Freud’s involvement with clients was equated with a blank screen.

Nonetheless, transference and countertransference were rooted in the therapeutic relationship. The patient–psychiatrist relationship and the clinician’s attentiveness were critically important.

Freud’s contemporary, Alfred Adler, may have been the first to emphasize the importance of counseling relationships characterized by empathy and respect. Adler contended that his initial task was to facilitate a therapeutic relationship characterized by equality, mutual trust, respect, involvement, and confidence.

Carl Rogers became a herald of the counseling relationship. According to Rogers (1961), the relationship is more than the foundation for counseling; the *relationship* is the therapy. In Rogers’s words, “If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself or herself the capacity to use that relationship for growth and change, and personal development will occur” (p. 3). Rogers demonstrated his trust for others as he listened to them, cared about them, encouraged them, and facilitated egalitarian relationships with them (Bankart, 1997).

In recent years, counselors have recognized that the relationship is not the only necessary condition for growth to occur in some cases. Instead, a blend of the therapeutic relationship and the treatment method contribute to successful outcomes.



BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH BASIC SKILLS

Let’s start with an experiment. We suggest doing this with another person. However, if you are alone, you can use a mirror.

1. With your partner, initiate a conversation during which you both cross your arms, cross your legs, lean back, and avoid eye contact. What happens?
2. For the second stage of the experiment, pretend that one of you is a professional counselor and one of you is an adult client. While the client tries to visit with the counselor about exploring career options, the counselor should, once again, cross his or her legs and arms, lean back, and avoid eye contact. How is this for both of you?
3. Reverse roles, and repeat the second step.
4. For the final step in this experiment, take turns. Try to communicate interest, attention, and concern without using any words. Again, give feedback to one another.

NONVERBAL ATTENDING

“One cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 48) is a broadly accepted family systems principle. Whether or not an individual says a word, he or she transmits messages. These nonverbal messages are potent, even though they are quite vulnerable to misinterpretation. For optimal clarity, professional counselors strive for congruence between verbal and nonverbal attending. They also remain alert to clients’ incongruent messages.

Nonverbal communication, sometimes called *analog*, includes many factors. For example, voice tones and variations contribute to messages. Posture, appearance,

gestures, facial expressions, and even breathing are other elements of nonverbal communication. Generally, nonverbal attending skills include these elements:

- maintaining appropriate levels of eye contact,
- uncrossing arms and legs,
- leaning slightly forward,
- changing facial expressions and voice tones according to verbal communication,
- avoiding distracting mannerisms (e.g., twirling hair, waving hands in the air),
- appearing relaxed and comfortable, and
- attending to therapeutic use of silence.

Imagine that someone smiles at you, maintains comfortable eye contact with you, and speaks in gentle tones while saying “I simply cannot stand to be with you.” Perhaps it is easier to imagine someone glaring at you, decidedly placing hands on the hips, and saying in a loud voice “No. I am not mad at you.” When words and nonverbal communications are inconsistent, people typically trust the nonverbal messages.

Nonverbal actions can be difficult to interpret and communicate because of cultural differences. For example, adults who are raised in Western cultures are usually quite comfortable with eye contact. A comfortable gaze is associated with presence and attention. However, in some cultures eye contact is associated with disrespect. Leaning forward may be experienced as aggression or intrusion. Thus, sensitivity to preferences and familiarity, typically communicated nonverbally, is essential.

Counselors’ attention to their own nonverbal factors is part of self-awareness. For example, Mary was in a consultation session with a parent. Her arms were crossed, and she appeared rigid—though she had a gentle smile on her face and her responses were accurate. When we watched the tape of the session, Mary realized that she was uncomfortable with the parent. She felt intimidated. Her crossed arms may have been an unconscious effort to protect herself.

There is no set “rule” about personal space.

Individuals’ preferences and comfort with personal space vary.

One person’s preferences fluctuate. Some people are sensitive to being touched.

Asking permission or remaining alert to nonverbal cues is respectful and prudent.

TRACKING

Young children often communicate with actions or through play. Astute professional counselors acknowledge and respond to play therapy actions by *tracking*, which is a verbal response that identifies or describes a child’s behavior. Additionally, they demonstrate their attention with tracking responses. For example, a counselor might say “You are looking around the room to see what is here” or “You’re trying to roll your sleeve.”

Counselors use tracking with adolescents and adults by nodding their heads to show they are following the content, changing their facial expression to match the feeling or content of the message, and using minimal encouragers, such as *yes* or *OK*. Through the use of nonverbal attending and tracking, counselors establish that they are present and focused on the clients and their concerns.

In this tour you will meet a few professional counselors, in addition to several clients. For example, you will meet **Anita**, a 7th grade student. She is having one of those days when everything seems to go wrong, and people repeatedly misunderstand her. **Paul** is a senior who has encountered competing expectations from a variety of important people in his life. **Jeremy** is a middle-aged adult who has devoted years to a firm and been denied a position for which he'd applied. **Teriqua** is a young woman who has recently moved from Alabama to Colorado.

REFLECTING CONTENT

Counselors communicate their understanding of clients' words and their situations by reflecting content (sometimes called paraphrasing). They use a combination of clients' words and their own words to "reflect back" what they have heard. Here are two examples:

- Anita:** It was a terrible day. First of all Bill asked me to help him with his creative writing assignment. Beth became angry at both of us because she wanted Bill to go skating with her. And then Dad got mad at me because I got home late.
- Counselor:** Your day has been tough because you were trying to help Bill, and people got mad at you.
- Paul:** I'm not sure where to start. I have to get applications for college and financial aid ready. I have a major assignment due in chem. My mom needs me to help get the house ready for company, and Beth wants to go to the movies.
- Counselor:** You have so many things you need to do. Applications are due. Assignments are due. You have responsibilities at home. And Beth wants you to spend time with her.

Because paraphrasing is fairly straightforward, the responses may seem like mimicking or parroting. The challenge is to succinctly capture the essence of the content as well as the aspects of the content that are most important. Counselors also listen for core messages, themes, and perceptions in order to understand the other person as fully and accurately as possible.

REFLECTING AFFECT

Our responses more fully capture clients' experiences when we reflect *affect* (or feelings) as well as content. Reflecting affect adds the dimension of inferring another person's feelings regarding the content as well as gaining insight about personal experiences. In the following example, the counselor reflects both aspects of Jeremy's statement.

Jeremy: It isn't fair. I was supposed to get that promotion at work. I had worked hard for it. I have been loyal to the company for years. I was situated for the supervisor position. And then this young whippersnapper, Aaron, arrived and everyone began deferring to him for leadership.

Counselor: You are angry and discouraged. You devoted years to the company and did all the right things so you would get a position that was given to someone who is younger and less experienced.

Notice how the counselor continues to reflect content and affect in this longer exchange with Teriqua.

Teriqua: I moved to Colorado 6 months ago. Work is going fine. I like my condo. But I don't have any connections. I'm exhausted from trying to get acquainted.

Counselor: Even though you feel comfortable at work and at home, you are lonely. You're discouraged because you've worked hard to build relationships.

Teriqua: I didn't have *any* trouble making new friends in Alabama. And I had lots of them. What's going on here?

Counselor: You're confused because finding new friends has been easy for you before.

Teriqua: Yes! I had lots of friends at church. I was in the middle of all the neighborhood activities. I knew people wherever I went. It's like I'm on the outside looking in here.

Counselor: You are trying to figure out what's not working for you here and desperately wanting to be involved and know people.

Teriqua: Sometimes I think Colorado people are just not friendly. And then sometimes I think it's because I'm different.

Counselor: Sometimes you're angry at the people in Colorado. Sometimes you worry that you are different from folks here and that you'll never be accepted or be able to fit in.

With practice, professional helpers reflect affect with short phrases, such as "You are angry" or "This has been scary for you." Notice how the same goal of helping Teriqua tell her story can be met with shortened reflections.

Teriqua: I moved to Colorado 6 months ago. Work is going fine. I like my condo. But I don't have any connections. I'm exhausted from trying to get acquainted.

Counselor: You are lonely and want to be included.

Teriqua: I didn't have *any* trouble making new friends in Alabama. And I had lots of them. What's going on here?

Counselor: This is confusing for you.

Teriqua: Yes! I had lots of friends at church. I was in the middle of all the neighborhood activities. I knew people wherever I went. It's like I'm on the outside looking in here.

Counselor: You miss your friends and having so many friends—especially because you feel so isolated here.

Teriqua: Sometimes I think Colorado people are just not friendly. And then sometimes I think it's because I'm different.

Counselor: You feel so alone—even different from others.



Practicing Nonverbal Attending, Reflecting Content, and Reflecting Affect

1. Work in dyads, with Partner A and Partner B.
2. During the first 5 minutes, Partner A's role is to talk about a recent event that was somewhat perplexing or confusing. Partner B's role is to nonverbally communicate presence and attention, reflect content, and reflect affect.
3. After 5 minutes, Partner B can give feedback to Partner A. For example, the partner might say "Even though you weren't accurate in your reflection about my being irritated, I still knew you wanted to understand me because you tried to reflect. You sat calmly, and your arms and legs were uncrossed. You didn't seem to be in a hurry to do anything but listen. I liked that. You seemed to have trouble making eye contact with me."
4. During the next 5 minutes, Partner B's role is to talk about a pending decision while Partner A nonverbally communicates presence and attention, reflects content, and reflects affect.
5. Finally, Partner A should give feedback to Partner B.



How did you experience the experiment?

What did you learn from it?

CLARIFYING

Clarification responses are appropriate when counselors are uncertain about something a client has said. Clarification responses also help clients achieve personal clarity. Clarification statements can take the form of a question or a restatement with an explicit clarifying component (e.g., “Now, let me see if I have this right”).

In the following sections, you will be introduced to **Ben’s parent**. The parent is angry and frustrated because Ben has a history of behavior problems at school. Notice how the counselor uses clarification to ascertain an accurate understanding of this parent.

- Parent:** I’m so angry because Ben is in trouble again. It seems like all I do is come to school to deal with problems he gets himself into.
- Counselor:** You are angry at Ben and also frustrated because your many trips to school have not changed anything.
- Parent:** Yeah. I try so hard to be understanding because I know Ben’s limitations are contributing to his behavioral problems, and sometimes I just run out of patience.
- Counselor:** I’m sorry. I’m not sure what limitations you are talking about. I only knew about some health-related issues. [The counselor requests clarification.]
- Parent:** Yes, Ben has asthma, and his allergies sometimes interfere with his concentration.
- Counselor:** And you are seeing connections between the difficulties Ben has at school and his asthma.
- Parent:** Ben often has asthma attacks at night. Of course we’re up several hours as we use his inhalers to help get his breathing regulated. During allergy season this happens more often. We’re usually able to get things stabilized, but Ben loses so much energy in the process, and he doesn’t get enough rest. He has trouble concentrating at school, and seems to be more irritable.
- Counselor:** OK. Now I understand.

SUMMARIZING

Summarizing responses assists professional counselors particularly when starting a session, introducing a transition, or ending a session. With summaries, counselors capture the essence and key elements of a session or segment of a session. They provide additional evidence that counselors do, indeed, understand the messages that clients endeavor to communicate.

For example, in response to Teriqua's series of comments, a counselor might say "Even though you've lived here for several months, you haven't been able to find social opportunities and new friends. This is a new experience for you because you had lots of friends in Alabama, and you were so involved. You're confused and discouraged because you don't know what is going on for sure, and you worry that you will never feel connected here." (Another transition summary is illustrated with Thor on page 31.)

After a summary, counselors can facilitate a transition to problem solving or continue listening to assist the other person as the situation is explored. For example, a counselor might introduce a transition in the session by saying "Before we talk about how you'd like things to be, I want to be sure I fully understand what is going on for you. You are angry. You feel betrayed by your employer because someone with much less experience than you was given a position for which you'd worked for many years. A part of you wants to walk away from the company because you are so unhappy. On the other hand, you can't imagine starting somewhere else with fewer benefits, less pay, and no seniority. You feel trapped in a situation that has become defeating."

FACILITATIVE QUESTIONING

Professional orientation to questions has changed over the years. Many counselors in our cohorts were not allowed to ask any questions. We have a friend who failed an entire assignment because he asked one question on a taped counseling session. Our position is not quite so strong. Yet, counselors-in-training with whom we worked often complained because they could not imagine how they could work without asking multiple questions.

We propose two categories of questions to aid professionals in working with clients. **Information acquisition questions**, the first type, are clear requests for information (e.g., "How old are you?"). Indeed, there are times when counselors need clear information to be responsibly helpful. However, as their facilitation skills develop, counselors learn that clients often share the important information and tell their life stories on their terms when we track, reflect, and summarize.

Facilitative inquiries, the second type of question, are designed to increase self-awareness, introspection, reflection, and exploration of optional meanings. Facilitative inquiries also assist clients in clarifying goals, making plans to achieve goals, circumventing setbacks, and generalizing their success to other areas.

Well-composed questions *are* therapeutic. However, it is important to remember that we are not interrogating attorneys! Additionally, we don't ask questions simply to fill the time or to satisfy our curiosity. Rather, questions are targeted at increasing

self-understanding, insight, and resolution of challenges. Notice ways you can pose questions with versatility and for a variety of purposes:

- How was that for you? (invites reactions including thoughts, feelings, and assigned meaning)
- I have a hunch I'd like to check out with you. (tentatively poses a hypothesis)
- What possibilities have you considered? (implies that client has considered options and that he or she has options)
- What are your thoughts about these three options? (encourages a cognitive response)
- What challenges will you encounter this week? (assists in identifying challenges and planning strategies for maintaining progress)
- What day will be the most difficult for you? (implies the normalcy of difficult days and provides opportunity to circumvent difficulties that may arise)
- I'm wondering if you would be willing to talk about your reactions to Mr. Nillson. (empowers the client to determine if he or she will answer and prevents a closed question trap)
- How will you know when you are ready to make the decision? (invites tangible indicators of progress toward goals)
- I'm wondering what you said to yourself about missing the deadline. (introduces a cognitive focus that may be useful for intervention)
- I'm wondering how it would be for you to apply for the position, knowing you may not be selected. (assists client in achieving self-understanding and potentially increased courage)
- Who will be the first to notice that you have taken responsibility for training rules? (identifies indicators of success as well as potentially supportive individuals)
- To whom will you turn for support when you feel discouraged or tempted to violate training rules? (assists client in identifying sources of encouragement and circumventing potential setbacks)

In this section you will meet **Thor**, who has been referred to you by his supervisor. One of the challenges in these kinds of referrals is ascertaining who the “client” really is (i.e., the supervisor or the employee), and who is involved in the therapeutic contract.

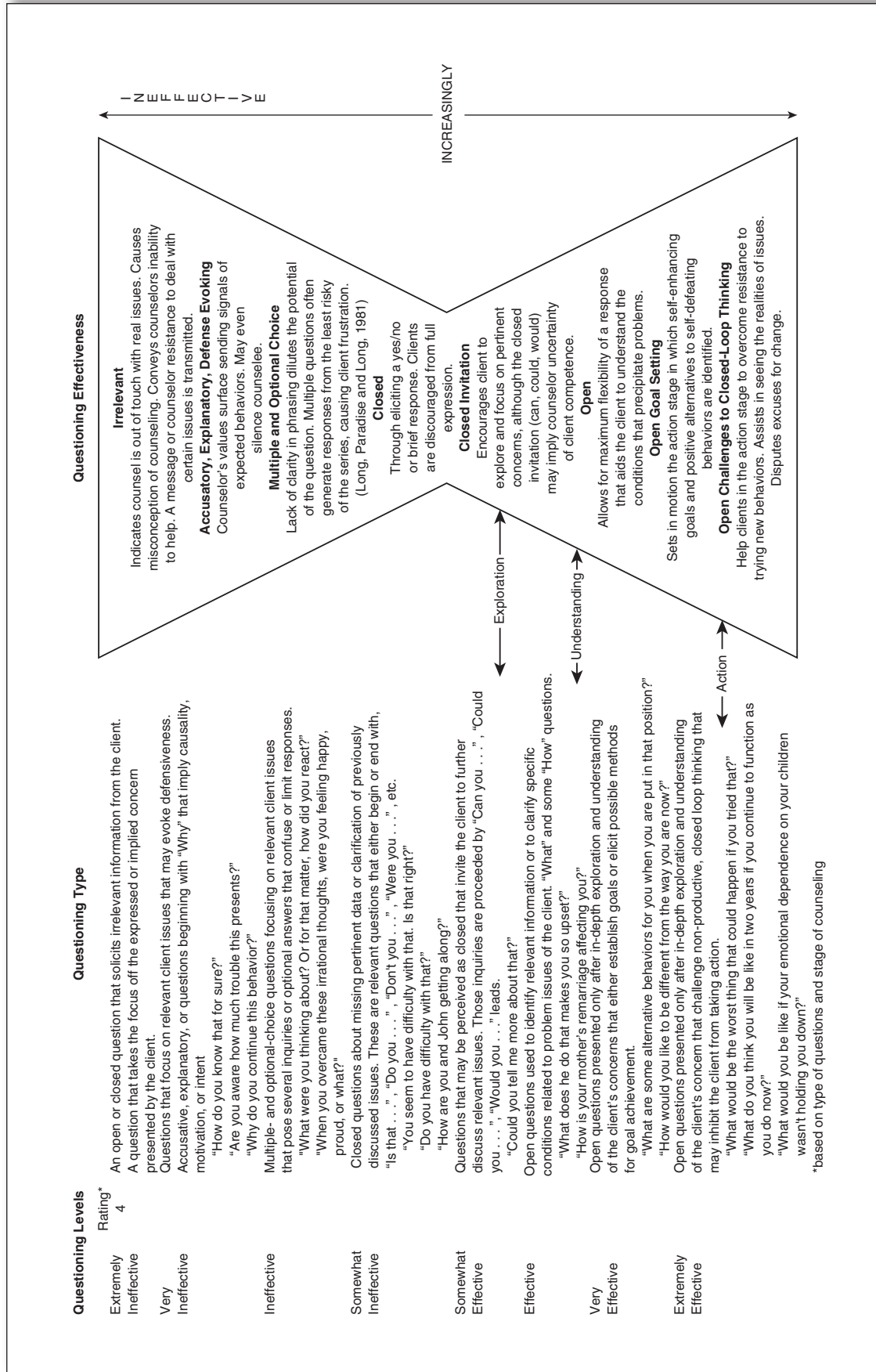


Generating Questions

Asking questions that encourage deeper reflection and exploration is more difficult than it seems. As a practice exercise, generate as many questions as you can in response to Thor, who is a supervisor in the service shop of a major automobile dealership.

Thor: This is about the most ridiculous situation I've ever been in. My boss sent me to you. She thinks I have an anger problem. Just tell me, how am I supposed to supervise a crew of headstrong mechanics without getting mad sometimes? What am I supposed to do when they mess up?!

Figure 2.1 Questioning Effectiveness Model



Source: Sklare, G., Portes, P., & Splete, H. (1985). Developing questioning effectiveness in counseling. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 25, 12-20. Reprinted with permission from Wiley.

communicate covert advice, such as “Have you thought about taking a class in anger management?”

Questions rated as +1 are also closed. They are positive because they *invite* further discussion. The problem is that they can also be answered in one word, and sometimes that word is *no*. A +1 question for Thor might be “Would you be willing to talk about ways your anger has caused problems in other areas of your life?”

Effective counselors most frequently ask +2 questions. These carefully composed questions invite self-exploration; thus, they allow the broadest range and depth of responses. These questions often begin with “how” or “what.” An example of a +2 question is “To what extent do you perceive that anger is causing problems for you?” or “In what ways do you believe your anger is causing problems for you?”

Questions rated as +3 and +4 are used less often. Their ratings relate to timing as well as phrasing. The +3 questions are asked after the counselor *and* client have a thorough understanding of the presenting concern. They introduce or amplify the goal-setting process. Questions in the +4 category often accompany +3 questions. These queries strengthen plans and propel energy for goal attainment. For Thor, the sequence might begin with “What options are available to you when one of the mechanics’ work does not meet company standards?” (+3) and “What warnings will your internal wisdom give you that will alert you to be cautious about becoming angry?” (+4).

Caution: When asked prematurely, +3 and +4 questions become –4 questions because they are irrelevant.



Return to the questions you wrote in response to Thor. Rank each one according to the model. Consider modifications you could make to your –2, –1, and +1 questions so that they would be +2 questions.

The form and the frequency of questions seem to present the greatest challenges for counselors-in-training. Sometimes, they get stuck in question traps from which they can’t find an escape. One question seems to beget another, and they quickly run out of ideas for what to ask next. Unfortunately, this type of exchange is not productive, and clients become frustrated or dependent. If this type of interaction continues, the relationship may be damaged.

One strategy for escaping a question trap is to say something like “That wasn’t how I wanted to phrase that. Let me try again.”

The following example illustrates an ineffective and unhelpful exchange between the counselor and Thor. It may also provide comic relief 😊.

Thor: I think it may be a lost cause to satisfy my supervisor. I don’t think she has a clue about how to manage men. We only have one female mechanic and I never get angry at her, but you can’t supervise men without being tough.

Counselor: So, would it be better for you to manage the mechanics if they were all women?

- Thor:** Well, no, because there are many things that women can't do.
- Counselor:** Like what?
- Thor:** Mmmm well, they can't lift as much. They don't know as much about engines. They don't . . . I don't know . . .
- Counselor:** But wouldn't you enjoy it more if they were all women?
- Thor:** Maybe.
- Counselor:** Would you rather have all women, all men, or some of both?
- Thor:** I don't know, probably all men.
- Counselor:** Why?
- Thor:** Because I wouldn't have to worry about being too tough.
- Counselor:** Why would you worry about being too tough?
- Thor:** Look, I'm worried about getting fired.
- Counselor:** Well, what are you hoping I can do to keep you from getting fired?

The counselor in the following example combines reflection and questions to help Thor explore his difficulties with anger. With this type of interaction, the counselor is able to obtain a clearer understanding of Thor's difficulties.

- Thor:** I think it may be a lost cause to satisfy my supervisor. I don't think she has a clue about how men manage men. We only have one female mechanic and I never get angry at her, but you can't supervise men without being tough.
- Counselor:** You're thinking it is more of a problem between you and your supervisor than a problem with your anger when the mechanics are messing up.
- Thor:** Well, I think the mechanics need to know that I won't put up with mistakes. If they don't know I'm angry, they will not worry about making mistakes.
- Counselor:** So, for you the anger is a way of preventing mechanics from making mistakes. That is part of your responsibility as a supervisor.
- Thor:** Yes, I really don't know any other way to get them to respect me and know that I mean business.
- Counselor:** There are several things that are important to you. One of them is that you feel responsible for the work the mechanics do, and you want the work done well.
- Thor:** Yes. Absolutely. When a car rolls off the floor, I want the owner to know that we've fixed it, and that it will be reliable.

- Counselor:** You want the work to be well done—regardless of who does it. You want the mechanics to do a good job and respect you. And the way you have tried to let them know about your expectations is to get angry when their performance doesn't measure up. (summary)
- Thor:** I guess that is about it.
- Counselor:** Let's just say that I tell you there may be other ways to respond when the mechanics mess up. How likely is it that you would be open to considering them?
- Thor:** I would take a look at possibilities, I suppose. But I want a way that produces results.
- Counselor:** An important goal for you is to be able to respond in a way that would limit the mistakes that mechanics make. You would also want the mechanics to respect you.
- Thor:** Yes.
- Counselor:** And now when you become angry you have a problem with your supervisor. I'm wondering—to what extent is getting angry a problem for you?
- Thor:** Well, if it is a problem with my supervisor, it is a problem for me. I would rather not be fired.
- Counselor:** So the primary reason you would consider a different way of responding to your mechanics is to satisfy your supervisor.
- Thor:** Yes, although some of the mechanics are upset. The main reason the supervisor referred me to you is because the mechanics talked to her.
- Counselor:** Sounds like another benefit of not getting so angry might be having a better relationship with your mechanics.
- Thor:** Yes, but understand—not all of the mechanics are upset with me.
- Counselor:** I understand, so you would like to explore new ways of responding to mechanics when they make mistakes so your supervisor will be satisfied and so you will have a better relationship with some of the people who work under your supervision. It is important that the mechanics you supervise do quality work and respect you. (summary)
- Thor:** That pretty much covers it.
- Counselor:** Before we consider new ways that you could respond and achieve this goal, I'd like to ask you a few questions. It would be helpful for me to know more about your experience in getting angry. Sometimes anger seems like it is automatic, but there are always thoughts that accompany anger. I wonder if you could think about the last time you were at work and became angry. What were you saying to yourself when you first noticed being angry?

Thor: I'm not sure. I guess something like "You made a stupid mistake, you should know better." That is what I said to the mechanic.

[Later in the session]

Counselor: OK, you have been able to identify some of your thoughts that accompany your anger. Your ability to do this is helpful. I noticed that these thoughts are about how incompetent the mechanics are, and they are thoughts that result in your becoming angry. Before we decide about alternative ways to respond, what other thoughts could you have when the mechanics are messing up that are not as harsh, but still true?

Thor: I don't know. I will have to think about that.

Counselor: Fair enough. We can make that a homework assignment.

The above dialogue is an abbreviated series of interactions indicating a cognitive approach. Thor likely has thoughts or worries about his competence that warrant exploration. Anger management includes affective and behavioral interventions.

Also, notice that the counselor let Thor dictate when they would move from the situation to a goal. That segue suggests that the counselor thought Thor was ready to begin the problem-solving process.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, some questions are asked to acquire important information. Professional helpers are skillful in discerning information they need in order to be helpful. They overcome their own curiosity, and they ask questions judiciously to avoid an interrogative interaction. They also recognize when using a

We learn some strategies. We unlearn or avoid others!

question to facilitate clarification is appropriate. When too many questions are used, clients tend to offer less information and wait for the counselor's next question.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

It is unlikely that counselors would use communication roadblocks illustrated in Table 2.1. Consider examples of potential, subtle roadblocks (e.g., giving advice, interrogating, mind reading, psychologizing, and minimizing) that could disrupt communication during a counseling session.

We have reviewed basic skills of counseling that are particularly helpful when endeavoring to develop solid working relationships with individuals of all ages. In this section, we call attention to communication roadblocks based on an original list of barriers identified by Thomas Gordon (1970, 1974). Even though Gordon's list of barriers was originally published over 40 years ago, contemporary authors continue to build on his work as we have. Gordon's roadblocks are listed in Table 2.1. The examples are drawn from a variety of contexts.

Table 2.1 Roadblocks to Communication

Roadblock	Examples
Bossing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Go home right now and begin watching what you eat.
Admonishing or threatening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You're asking for trouble if you decide to do that.
Preaching and lecturing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are much too responsible to walk away from your job. Besides, that would disappoint your parents. If I've told you once, I've told you 100 times that you must start thinking about your future right now.
Giving advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If I were you, I would just talk with your partner and tell him how you feel. You just need to ignore that character and get on with your life. You should just lower your expectations and be thankful for whatever job that is offered to you.
Criticizing and judging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are so lazy! How could you possibly get a promotion when you didn't even try? Your appearance is disrespectful.
Interrogating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why did you do it this way? What were you thinking of when you did that?
Distracting or changing the subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Say, have you heard about that new movie downtown? Let's play a game so you can forget about your worries.
Making sarcastic comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did you <i>think</i> it would turn out?! That was stupid.
Mind reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I know. You are mad at me because I came in late.
Placating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You're such a nice person; I know you can do that. You'll be OK in just a few days. You are such a strong person that you will be able to get over this easily.
Psychologizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I know what your problem is. You are still having problems adjusting to your new home. You are so defensive.
One-upping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You think you have problems. Mine are much worse than yours.
Minimizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 3 months, you will have forgotten all about this. You're stewing and fretting over something as ridiculous as that?
Assigning motives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are just trying to irritate me! You did that just to get even with me!
Interrupting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sorry to interrupt, but how old is John?

Source: Adapted from Gordon's twelve roadblocks to communication, Gordon, 1970, 1974.

Although we typically avoid focusing on mistakes that counselors-in-training with whom we worked made, we have found that it is helpful to identify common errors that we have observed and, for the record, errors that we made when we were graduate students! The following paragraphs include examples of pitfalls to avoid.

These pitfalls are not unique to the counseling relationship.

They interfere with all personal as well as professional communication.

How Do You Feel About That?

This question often appears on television sitcoms, usually as a subtle satirical comment about mental health professionals. The question may sometimes be appropriate; in our experience, that is unusual. Although counselors often

focus on feelings with their reflections, asking clients to identify their feelings rarely has value. The response is often a cognition, and it seldom leads to productive work.

Instead, empathic counselors demonstrate their keen attention and understanding by reflecting *their* understanding of clients' thoughts and feelings. If you are really unsure of what the feeling is behind a client's statement, try a general exploratory statement to help you understand the situation better. An example is "It sounds like you have so many different feelings going on inside of you right now. Help me understand what it's like to have your dad in jail."

Turning Good Reflections Into Questions

It is quite common for counselors-in-training to communicate good reflections; however, they are unsure of themselves. Thus, they say something like "You are angry at him, aren't you?" or "You are worried about your bills. Am I right?" Although these are not fatal errors, they may result in a one-word response and interrupt the dialogue.

Focusing on a Third Party

Sometimes it is important to inquire about clients' understanding of others' perceptions. Usually, however, focusing on someone external to the counseling relationship is not productive. Clients may attempt to deflect attention from themselves by focusing on friends and family members rather than on their own experiences and feelings. Sometimes, clients and counselors are uncomfortable with intensity. They inadvertently collude in "running away from intensity" by focusing on someone outside the counseling room.

Examples of focusing on a third party include such questions as "How does your father feel about you going to the university?" or "What was he trying to accomplish?"

Interchanging Think and Feel

Although *think* and *feel* are not synonyms, they are often substituted for each other during informal conversations and even formal writing. For example, a counselor might say "You feel that he was wrong when he accused you." The counselor likely believes this response reflected feelings; actually, no feelings are involved in this statement.

We encourage you to develop a habit of using think and feel correctly. Accurate use of the terms helps counselors reflect more precisely and poignantly, avert confusion, and clarify clients' experiences. Additionally, as counselors help clients discern their thoughts from their feelings, they lay groundwork for interventions based on cognitive, behavioral, and problem solving approaches.

A clue for identifying when reference is being made to a cognition rather than an emotion is the use of the word *that* (e.g., "you feel that she should not be the supervisor"). Correct phrasing would be "You think the CEO was wrong to select her for the supervisor position."

Minimizing and Qualifying Reflections

Reflecting clients' experiences with accurate intensity is often challenging. For example, a counselor might say "You are feeling just a little irritated," when the client is furious. At other times, the reflections are so tentative that the value is diminished, for example, "I'm not sure about this, but it sounds like you may be feeling just a bit anxious because of the test you have scheduled." These statements reduce the effectiveness of counselors' responses. An inadvertent implication might be that the counselor does not think the presenting problem is important. Actually, it is better to risk deeper level empathic responses and be wrong than to remain at a shallow level of reflecting and concluding that "empathy doesn't work" (a comment we have heard from counselors-in-training before they learned to reflect with accuracy).

Vaguely Focused Reflections

Counselors-in-training often have trouble using precise and personalized language. For example, someone might say "How's it going today?" probably meaning "How are you today?" or "How's your day been?" Sometimes, professionals say "There's some anger there." Of course, anger is not freely floating in the atmosphere somewhere; the client is experiencing anger. As you reflect, strive for crisp, accurate, targeted language.

Advice Couched as a Question

Counselors-in-training sometimes have difficulty letting go of the notion that much of our work is giving advice or telling clients what to do. That approach rarely works. If it were effective, children would be champions in multiple arenas because they get so much advice from so many sources!

Covert advice is not effective either, and it's dishonest. For example, the question "Have you asked him to help you with the problem?" probably means "I think you should ask him to help you with the problem." Similarly, "Why don't you stand up to your friends?" is not a good question, and it may not be good advice.

Asking Closed Questions and Creating Question Traps

Particularly with children and youth, closed questions yield minimal answers. Without an adequate response, counselors typically ask another closed question and find themselves in a question trap. Open-ended questions are more beneficial than

closed questions; however, they can also result in a question trap if too many are asked or they are not properly balanced with reflections.

Cheerleading and Praising

Although counselors appropriately encourage their clients and recognize their accomplishments, phrases like “I know you can do it” and “You’re such a great person” are not helpful.

BEFORE YOU CONDUCT YOUR FIRST SESSION OR A SESSION IN AN UNFAMILIAR SITUATION

Undoubtedly, you will be nervous before you see your first client for individual counseling or when you facilitate your first counseling group. We are sometimes anxious and question our abilities when we initiate a counseling relationship, and we’ve done this work for many years! Even Carl Whitaker, a well-known family therapist, often said he was anxious before seeing clients, particularly for the first time. In other words, a certain level of anxiety is normal.

It may be helpful to remind yourself of an important task of the first session: facilitating a relationship. New clients are often anxious as well. They may be afraid of being judged or criticized. During the first few minutes, skillful counselors lay the foundation and form a template for how the relationship will develop and even conclude (Swift, Greenberg, Whipple, & Kominiak, 2012). Thus, it is important to communicate acceptance, respect, warmth, and your understanding of each client’s unique experience.

COMBINING SKILLS AS WE NEAR THE END OF TOUR 2

Nonverbally attending, tracking, paraphrasing, reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and skillfully asking questions are not isolated skills. As counselors learn to use all of these techniques, the art of their work becomes more obvious. Rarely, though, does that artistry appear without practice. Thus, we encourage you to practice during conversations with friends and while observing other people. For example, practice reflecting while you watch television. You might say “She looks angry” or “He is happy because the girl said she would help him with the homework.” You might reflect as you go through checkout lines in stores, but be careful! You may start a conversation that will take longer than you expected!

Reflection Rx:

For each of these reflections, identify a problem and compose an improved response.

You feel that your supervisor was incredibly unfair.

Problem:



Improvement:

You're feeling sad and confused that you weren't invited to your sister's party. Is that right?

Problem:

Improvement:

You're maybe feeling just a little bit hurt that your partner's family went on vacation without you.

Problem:

Improvement:

Boy, there are just a lot of feelings going on there.

Problem:

Improvement:



Question Rx

For each of these questions, identify a problem and compose an improved facilitative inquiry.

Why did you ignore your son when he was explaining his college admission requirements to you?

Problem:

Improvement:

How do you feel about what she said to you?
Problem:

Improvement:

Were you hoping to get even, or were you trying to explain your situation?
Problem:

Improvement:

You're angry about that, aren't you?
Problem:

Improvement:

Have you thought about talking with your boss about how you feel?
Problem:

Improvement:

I'm wondering what your partner was feeling when your son stormed out of the room.
 Problem:

Improvement:

Think and Feel Rx



For each of the following, indicate whether or not the words *think* and *feel* are used correctly.

1. I feel like shouting when I leave the office on Friday.
2. I feel that no one really understands my problems.
3. I am thinking about going to the dentist right now, and I feel scared about it.
4. I feel terrified whenever I am around snakes.
5. I feel like I'm 10 feet tall when someone tells me I'm smart.
6. I feel really angry because I trusted my friend, and she told someone what I had asked her to keep private between us.
7. I feel like I haven't got a friend in the world.
8. I just crashed my car, and I feel that wasn't fair. After all, I just got it paid for last month.
9. I feel happy about buying some new clothes on Saturday. At the same time, I feel worried about how I'm going to pay my credit card bill.
10. I feel that Stanley does not understand me.

Reflecting Content and Affect



Write a reflection of both content and affect for each of these comments

Isabella: I couldn't go to baseball practice because I had to finish my creative writing composition. Then, I had to watch my baby sister while Dad ran some errands. Now, the coach won't let me play on the team this weekend. I guess it doesn't matter that much really.

Reflection:

Mr. Gomez: I don't know what else to do. Everything I've tried seems to backfire. I think the sophomore class is out to get rid of me, and I'd say they've been pretty successful.

Reflection:

Parent: I'm so angry at the girls in Annie's class. They are so mean to her. They call her names. They leave her out of their activities. They make fun of her clothes. They are absolutely cruel!

Reflection:

College Graduate: I just found out I didn't get the job. I know I could do the work if I had the chance.

Reflection:

Theo: It makes no sense. I thought everything was fine. Sure we had our problems, but divorce? I can't believe she left me!

Reflection:



Composing Facilitative Inquiry: +2 Questions

Compose +2 facilitative inquiries that would improve each of the following questions:

Counselor: Why did you ask me to see you today?

Improved Inquiry:

Counselor: Will you promise me that you'll walk around the block three times tomorrow?
Improved Inquiry:

Notice how counselors can inadvertently attempt to influence a client based on prejudices even about a location.

Counselor: How would you like to live in a rainy state like Oregon?
Improved Inquiry:

Counselor: How does your partner feel about your performance evaluation?
Improved Inquiry:

Survey Question: During your visit with us today, did you feel that the facilities were clean?

Improved Inquiry:

Composing Facilitative Inquiry: +3 Questions

Questions become +3 when they are well timed and when they engage clients in the process of setting goals. Assume you are working with Thor (featured earlier in this tour)



and that you are confident he is ready to establish direction for his work with you. Combine your style and your knowledge of effective questions to compose two questions you might ask:

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:



Composing Facilitative Inquiry: +4 Questions

Questions qualify for +4 when they build on the previous work and support goal attainment. These queries help clients identify and prepare for roadblocks, possible setbacks, and challenges that might develop. Again, working with Thor, compose two +4 questions to follow his responses to your +3 questions previously identified.

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:



Composition of Advanced Facilitative Inquiry

Compose facilitative inquiries that you believe would be helpful for Robin, Chris, and Jordan, and one question that would *not* be helpful.

Robin: What's the use? Even if I go back to college, I probably won't get a job. I know lots of people my age who graduated from college, and they're still waiting tables. They can make more money waiting tables than they could if they used their degree.

Facilitative Inquiry:

Inappropriate/Nonfacilitative Question:

Chris: What would you do if you were me? Have you ever wondered if you were queer?
Facilitative Inquiry:

Inappropriate/Nonfacilitative Question:

Jordan: I don't know. I'm struggling with so many questions about myself right now. Maybe there's something wrong with me. Worse yet, maybe I'm a bad person.

Facilitative Inquiry:

Inappropriate/Nonfacilitative Question:

What thoughts and feelings might underlie the questions Chris and Jordan verbally expressed? Would it be more helpful to respond with a reflection, a question, or a reflection and a question? (Bonus: How would Sklare et al. rank the question we just asked?!)



Compose a response that you believe would be most helpful for Robin.



1. Of all the skills presented in this tour, which are the hardest for you?

2. What personal attributes will help you master the basic helping skills?

3. What can you do to alleviate anxiety when working with clients?

TOUR 2 RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Cowles, J. (1997). Lessons from the little prince: Therapeutic relationships with children. *Professional School Counseling, 1*, 57–60.

Cowles captured the essence of work with children in this delightful article. Her insight is also relevant for working with adults.

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