

## 5. Your best inclusion tool -

### Good relationships with clients



There is one tool that will help overcome the many forms of social exclusion met by your clients: Your skill in building a relationship with them based on quality service. At the base of all good relationships is good communication. The foundation of good communication is good listening. You can help your client communicate with you, and improve your listening skills, by thinking carefully first about the way you ask questions. This will also help to improve the information you are given to listen to.

In this section, we provide four things for you to look at.

1. Background information about ‘*active listening*’. Then we ask you to reflect on your communication skills and check where you want to improve them.
2. *Asking the right questions* helps you explore ways in which you can learn more about your clients.
3. *Culture and communication* gives information on a key communication issues
4. *Disability and communication* gives more information on an area that people often need guidance about.

## Active listening skills – removing the barriers to good communication

‘Active’ listening means actively attending to the way you listen, as you listen. The more often you listen ‘actively’ the better you will get. Then it can become second nature. You may find you feel uncomfortable doing it at first. This can be because it’s new and there are things you realise you need to work on.

### a) Active listening involves:

- Focussing your mind on what is being said
- Taking careful account of the volume and tone of voice
- Checking your understanding of the ideas and meaning behind others’ words by using questions, summary or reflection
- Watching for the non-verbal clues like gestures, facial expression and body language
- Being aware of your own body language and facial expression. Is it friendly and unthreatening? Does it show that you are ‘with’ your client without being invasive of personal space?
- Being attentive, facing the client, offering eye-contact if appropriate. (Be sensitive to your client’s body language in response to eye contact. For some people and for some cultures, eye-contact may show dis-respect or be experienced as threatening)
- Be aware of what is not being said or is avoided
- Trying to gauge your client’s feelings about what is being said
- Putting the talker at ease, encouraging them with appropriate interaction

- Empathizing, identifying with your client's situation
- Recognising any limitations that your client may have in communicating with you and minimising these
- Being aware of your own prejudice, opinions and feelings so that these do not distract you
- Having enough time for the client and being patient
- Providing a good listening environment.

In Exercises 3.2 and 3.3 of [Section 3](#) of *Open Hearts Open Minds*, you had the opportunity to check out personal prejudices. You might like to look back at them and consider how you may need to acknowledge your different responses to people. See if you can put them aside, so that they do not interfere with your working relationships.

There are some other factors that we can unguardedly or unknowingly allow to affect the way we communicate. We've listed some of them in the box below. Without awareness of them, this can happen even though you are committed to equality in principle.

**b) Reactions to:**

- Unusual appearance, dress, disfigurement, obvious disability
- Race, gender, age
- Sensory impairment e.g. hearing loss, partial sight
- Accented speech, speech impediment, English as a second language
- Clients using language in a different way, interesting use of idiom or style of speech, lack of coherence
- Distracting gestures or mannerism
- Limited verbal communication skills or learning difficulty
- Raised emotional state, nervousness, mental illness

**c) Behaviour:**

- Not able to concentrate on the client – other things on your mind
- Appearing hurried or impatient, doodling, fiddling, paper shuffling
- Feeling tired or unwell
- Emotional involvement with the client's situation
- Dislike of the client's attitude or personality
- Being judgmental or not keeping an open mind
- Wanting to talk rather than listen, interrupting, asking too many questions
- Taking notes while trying to listen,
- Own appearance and body language threatening
- Seeing and imposing an "obvious" solution before you have all the information needed

**d) The places where we meet and talk:**

- Client is in a strange or new environment
- Unsuitable situation – working in a public or confined area or room that's too hot/cold
- Lack of privacy – being overheard
- Noisy background
- Size of room, comfort of seating
- Distractions around you

Everyone starts at a different place with their communication skills and abilities. You will already be aware of what you are doing in some situations. The next exercise will help you begin to apply these elements and make changes to the way you listen to clients.

### Exercise 5.1: Active listening skills

Choose a time when you know you will be having a conversation with a client. Choose one when you will have time afterwards to reflect on it. When you are preparing to meet them, read through the four lists of active-listening bullet-points. Create in your mind a simple, positive 'image' of active listening, built from list a) in the first box in this section. Make notes of this if you find it helpful.

After the conversation, go back to your image and note how things went. Write down any thoughts you have about improving your skills next time.

Repeat this exercise from time to time. Record any learning points and the progress you feel you are making.

<p><b>Preparation notes</b></p>	
<p><b>Conversation 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What you need to improve and why</li> </ul> <p>EXAMPLE: <i>Whole interview interrupted by phone calls. I lost concentration and client left alone and nervous. Need to bar calls.</i></p>	
<p><b>Conversation 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What you improved</li> </ul> <p>EXAMPLE: <i>Calls barred – no interruptions (need to turn off mobile too though)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What else you need to improve and why</li> </ul>	

### Asking the right questions

There are a number of ways to ask questions that prompt people to share information. The different types of questioning produce different results. The quality of information a client can give depends very much on the conversation. Asking the right kinds of questions is crucial.

## Open Questions

Open questions encourage a person to talk, as they ask for very general answers. They are often used at the start of conversations when you have very little knowledge about your client. They can help you to obtain more information and assist a client to explore their ideas.

Examples

- “Tell me about -----“
- “What happened when -----?”
- “What other things have you considered?”
- “What do you think about -----”
- “Give me an idea about the help you’ve been receiving so far.”

## Closed Questions

Closed questions simply ask for a yes or no answer. They do not encourage people to talk. They can be used to check understanding quickly, but can sometimes give a false answer. They are more likely to be used when you already have some information about your client. They can be used as a summary or to conclusion so that you can move onto another topic. You may also be able to re-focus a conversation that has drifted off course.

Examples

- “Did you like this type of work?”
- “Do you know how to get there?”
- “Is this information useful?”

## Specific or Direct Questions

A closed type of question, but one that usually has one short answer rather than yes or no. These are useful when you want to gather some factual information from the client. They can be useful when someone just wants to chat or whose attention needs to be focused. This type of question can help to determine what is really important to your client. Avoid ‘*why*’ questions until you have established rapport, as these can be very challenging (see probing questions).

Examples

- “What is your present employment?”
- “How did you find out about this service?”
- “Where did you live before?”

## Probing Questions

These are used to extract more detail. They can help the client to focus and the interviewer to gain insight into the client’s point of view. They can provide a challenge or a reality check. This can help the client to understand their own situation. Probing questions need to be relevant to the work that you are doing to support the client. If you are challenging a client, be sensitive and make sure you know why.

Examples

- “What exactly do you mean by -----?”
- “How did you feel about losing your job?”
- “Why did you do that?”
- “What are you going to do about this?”

## Comparisons

These help both you and the client to understand preferences or to see what is important. They can provide useful information and can easily be followed by other why, what and how questions.

### Examples

- “Did you find it easier to use the arm crutches or the walking frame? Why was this?”
- “You say that you liked volunteering in the hospital driving pool but not in the out and about service. These are both driving jobs, so what were the particular aspects that made the first enjoyable?”
- “Why did you request a new care assistant in place of your existing one, what were your concerns?”

## Hypothetical Questions

These can help your client to explore their ideas and preferences. It is important to realise that you get a hypothetical answer, which cannot be considered reliable. However, they are useful for opening up new areas of discussion.

### Examples

- “If you were offered a flat in this location would that be suitable?”
- “Supposing that you got the job, would you still want to finish the course?”
- “If you were able to arrange suitable respite child-care how many hours would you wish to set aside a week for a break?”

## Summarising

This involves feeding back to the client a shortened version of what you have been told. You use your own words to summarise. It shows that you have heard and helps check that you have a common understanding. If you have not understood, it gives the client an opportunity to correct you. It also provides a useful break in your listening and can give a bit of thinking time. It will often encourage the client to continue talking to you. Accurate and timely summaries will help you not to hijack the conversation with your own agenda. They can also prevent misunderstanding what has been said or making assumptions about the clients' needs.

### Examples

- “So once you have received some injury re-ablement support, you'd like to try some occupational therapy. You've also said some counselling would be useful. Then you'd like to decide whether you feel you can begin to get back to work gradually. You said that maybe you'll try a different kind of work.”
- “You've told me that you're not able to cope with a full time course at college as a lone parent. You said that you do still feel a need to learn some skills for the future”

## Reflecting

When you repeat a client's statement or question and 'send' it back to them it's called reflecting. Sometimes you'll use the exact words of the client and sometimes you'll rephrase in your own words. Reflecting can be used to clarify points, obtain further information or to show understanding. The technique differs from summarising as you are more likely to use the client's own words. Reflection is used more frequently, not after long periods of listening that requires you to summarise.

### Examples

Instead of the summarising examples given above you might reflect several times during the same conversations to elicit further information.

- “You are recovering physically and emotionally from a serious fall at work.” “You’re feeling unsure of yourself and your practical skills. You have discussed opportunities for occupational and emotional support with your re-ablement nurse.” “You want to work again, but to try something different, something you feel safe with.”
- “Your course was full time.” “You are a lone parent.” “You really want to learn some new skills.”

## Some Types of Questions to Avoid

### Multiple Questions

This can happen if you think you have an immediate need to ask several questions at once. It is made worse if you have not thought about the logical order in which to ask them. The client may be placed in the position of not remembering what was asked. They may latch onto one question or just answer the last or easiest one. It is far better to recognise that you have delivered a multiple question and stop the process. Then ask each one separately.

### Examples

- What agency referred you here, why was that, what do you know about us and can you fill out this form please?
- Why did you go there, who did you see, were they helpful or do you still need some more information?

### Leading Questions

A leading question suggests the expected answer. Clients will feel led to provide the answer you want, rather than give their own reply. These questions often arise from assumptions made by the interviewer and need to be used very carefully. There is a real danger of reinforcing your own ideas rather than listening to and learning from your client.

### Examples

- “So you won’t need any more information about childcare then, will you?”
- “You’ve read the notes about this before signing haven’t you?”
- “I suppose the Volunteer Bureau staff would have told you about this when you saw them last week?”
- So we’ve finished discussing your problem now, haven’t we?

### Judgmental Questions

These are a severe barrier to good communication. They only demonstrate your own values, attitudes or prejudices in an inappropriate way. Any questions of this type make it difficult for clients to give information about themselves freely. Rapport and empathy cannot be established.

### Examples

- “How can you return to work as a lone parent with three young children?”
- “Won’t you have problems travelling to college by bus with your disability?”
- “Do you really want me to take the report of this incident forward even though you can’t produce the evidence to prove it ever happened to you?”

### Exercise 5.2: Questioning Skills

Think of a situation with a client that you encounter frequently.

Write yourself a script about the situation in which you use one (or more) of *each* type of the questioning styles above. Include the types of questions that you should normally avoid!

Imagine the kind of responses you would give to the questions if you were your client. If possible ask a colleague to answer them, and give you 'real' answers.

Write your questions and the likely responses in the box below.

What did you notice about the likely responses to the question types that are best to avoid? Write your observations in the box below.

Which types of questions did you find easiest to write? These types are your communication strengths. Note these types of questioning in the box below, and build on these strengths.

What were the types of questions you found more difficult to construct? Practice writing a few more of these types of questions in the box below.

Developing your skills with these kinds of questions will help you improve your ability to communicate.

## Culture and communication

Most of the time in our daily lives we experience no difficulty in communicating with others. We speak the same language and feel we understand one another pretty well. If something seems unclear or we want more information, all we have to do is ask. If no one asks questions, we assume we have been understood.

This assumption does not always hold up where the people communicating come from different cultural backgrounds. It may, of course, be obvious to one or both parties that they have not understood. Quite often, however, this is not the case. They may think they have understood correctly, but in fact they have not. The message may have been read quite differently from how it was intended. People are likely to 'read' behaviour from the point of view of their own cultural group. They may not be aware of the possibly different meaning given to it, in the other person's culture.

The following points are an introductory guide to cross-cultural communication, but can be good practice in general communication. After all, there are likely to be some cultural differences between us and all the people we meet.

- People are different and will have their own perception of *normality* based upon their cultural framework.
- *Different* does not mean abnormal, dysfunctional or less valid. It means *different!*
- Don't interpret other people's body language in terms of your own cultural framework. For example, in some cultures lack of eye contact can be a sign of respect, not dishonesty.

- Don't assume you can interpret spoken language in terms of your own cultural framework. For example, concepts of family and the names applied to different family relationships can carry different meanings. For example in some cultures, "Uncle or Aunt" is a term of respect for a closely known elder (not a relative).
- Being clear and specific with language will help. For example, "early in the morning" may be 9 am to you and 6 am to someone else. Concepts and terms around time of day can vary substantially between cultures.
- Never assume that the message you 'send' is received in the way you intended. Always check.
- Never assume that you have received a message in the way it was intended. Always check. (Use the reflective type of questioning described earlier)
- Don't use terms or phrases that are unique to cultural groups to which you belong (e.g. office slang, regional slang, jargon)
- Remember that much humour depends on the cultural framework around it, including metaphors and current phrases. You and your client may find the same things funny. But you can find other ways to set your client at ease. A smile goes a long way.
- Be aware of your own body language and how it may be interpreted.
- Be careful not to use words that generalise, patronise or that could unintentionally cause offence. For example, avoid, talking about 'your people' or using ethnic terms as a sign of something bad. (For example "Black economy".)
- Be aware that your client may think you hold the power in the relationship. This may lead to particular kinds of response to the situation. This could include anger, resistance to, or withdrawal from you or your service. Or they may become very passive, resigned or giving way to you.
- People who speak English with an accent sometimes find their accent becomes stronger. This is likely to happen in situations of vulnerability, fatigue, tension and formality. You can help by finding ways to set clients at ease, and showing that you are listening.
- Your actions may be seen by people in the minority as representing the actions of the majority. Your actions say as much about your cultural group as they do about yourself.
- Understanding how and why people respond to your actions will enable you to reduce the possibility of conflict and misunderstanding.
- Treat all people with respect and dignity as you would expect to be treated.
- Treat people as individuals. They are not all the same.
- Make an effort to tailor your actions to fit the needs and lifestyle of the people you deal with.
- Learning about communication in different cultures can help. Be careful to recognise that even within cultures there can be cultural differences.
- Showing commitment to your clients and being undaunted by failure will keep you on track. Trying to communicate differently can help you develop a more inclusive approach to communication.

## Disability and communication

Most people want to treat disabled employees, job applicants and clients the same way as everyone else. They just aren't always sure how to go about it. The basic principle is that disabled people are individuals just like everyone else. Don't make assumptions about their abilities or needs. Don't forget some disabilities are hidden, for example epilepsy and mental illness. If you aren't sure how something might affect a disabled person, ask them for advice.

- Talk to your disabled client directly, not to other people who accompany them . This also applies to a deaf person accompanied by a sign language interpreter.
- When talking to a deaf person, find out – if necessary in writing – whether they lip-read. If they do, make sure your face is in the light, look directly at the person, speak clearly and naturally. Remembering to keep your hands away from your face.
- When you first meet a blind person, introduce yourself. When you are going to move away, tell them. Don't leave them talking to an empty space.
- When you are talking to someone with a speech impairment, concentrate on what is being said. Be patient and don't try to guess what they want to say. If you don't understand, don't pretend you do.
- If someone has difficulty understanding you be patient and be prepared to explain something more than once. Concentrate on using simple language.
- When talking to a wheelchair user, try to ensure that your eyes are at the same level as theirs, perhaps by sitting down. Don't lean on the wheelchair, it is part of the user's personal space.
- Avoid asking personal questions about a person's disability, such as "were you born like that?" But an employer could ask "Does your disability affect your ability to do this job?"
- If someone looks 'different' avoid staring. Concentrate on what they are saying, not on the way they look.
- If you are talking to an adult, treat them like an adult.
- Some words and phrases suggest the disabled person is dependent or helpless. Some have become terms of abuse or fun. Try to use positive language. E.g :

### Negative language

The disabled  
Suffering from/ crippled by/ afflicted by/ a victim of  
Deaf and dumb  
An epileptic  
Spastic  
Mentally handicapped/ subnormal  
Wheelchair bound

### Positive language

Disabled people/ people with disabilities  
A person who has / a person with  
Deaf without speech  
A person with epilepsy  
A person with cerebral palsy  
A person with a learning disability  
Wheelchair user