

PART TWO

BASIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR HELPERS

There are two sets of communication skills that are essential for helpers. The first set includes attending, listening, basic empathy, and probing and is the focus of the exercises in Part Two. The second set, communication skills associated with helping clients challenge themselves, is dealt with in the exercises associated with Step I-B of the helping model — helping clients challenge their blind spots and develop new, action-oriented perspectives.

In Part II, Section 5 deals with attending and listening, while Section 6 focuses on the communication of accurate empathic understanding and probing.

Section 5

COMMUNICATION SKILLS I: ATTENDING AND LISTENING

Much of helping takes place through a dialogue between client and helper. If this dialogue is to serve the overall problem-management and opportunity-development goals of the helping process, the quality of the dialogue is critical. In this section the exercises focus on (I) your "attending" behavior and (II) active listening.

I. EXERCISES IN ATTENDING

Your posture, gestures, facial expressions, and voice all send nonverbal messages to your clients. The purpose of the exercises in this section is to make you aware of the different kinds of nonverbal messages you send to clients through such things as body posture, facial expressions, and voice quality and how to use nonverbal behavior to communicate with them. It is important that what you say verbally is reinforced rather than muddled or contradicted by your nonverbal messages. Before doing these exercises, read Chapter Five in *The Skilled Helper*, Communication Skills I: Attending and Listening. There are two points. First, use your posture, gestures, facial expressions, and voice to *send messages* you want to clients, such as, "I want to work with you

to help you manage your life better." Second, attend carefully so that you can *listen* carefully to clients.

EXERCISE 6: BECOMING AWARE OF YOUR ATTENDING BEHAVIORS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

This is an exercise you do outside the training group in your everyday life. Observe your attending behaviors for a week — at home, with friends, at school, at work. You are not being asked to become preoccupied with the micro-behaviors of attending. Observe the quality of your presence to others when you engage in conversations with them. Of course, even being asked to "watch yourself" will induce changes in your behavior; you will probably use more effective attending behaviors than you ordinarily do. The purpose of this exercise is to sensitize you to attending behaviors in general and to get some idea of what your day-to-day attending style looks like. First, read about attending skills in the text.

1. Read the parts of Chapter Five, Attending and Listening, that deal with attending behavior.
2. Watch yourself for a week attending (or not attending) to others in various social settings.
3. What are you like when you are with and listening to others, especially in a serious situation? What do you do well? What needs improvement in your attending style?

EXERCISE 7: OBSERVING AND GIVING FEEDBACK ON QUALITY OF PRESENCE

In the training sessions, make sure that your nonverbal behavior is helping you work effectively with others and sending the messages you want to send. Throughout the training program, observe the nonverbal behavior of your fellow trainees and give them feedback on how it affects you when you play the role of client or observer. Throughout the training program, ask for feedback on your own attending style.

Exercise 7, then, is an exercise that pertains to the entire length of the training program. You are asked to give ongoing feedback to yourself and to the other members of the training group on the quality of your presence to one another as you interact, learn, and practice helping skills. Recall especially the basic elements of physical attending summarized by the acronym *SOLER*:

- S Face your clients **SQUARELY**. This says that you are available to work with them.
- O Adopt an **OPEN** posture. This says that you are open to your clients and want to be nondefensive.

- L LEAN** toward the client at times. This underscores your attentiveness and lets clients know that you are with them.
- E** Maintain good **EYE** contact without staring. This tells your clients of your interest in them and their concerns.
- R** Remain relatively **RELAXED** with clients as you interact with them. This indicates your confidence in what you are doing and also helps clients relax.

Of course, these are guidelines rather than hard and fast rules. Here is a checklist to help you provide that feedback to your fellow helpers.

- How effectively is the helper using postural cues to indicate a willingness to work with the client?
- In what ways does the helper distract clients and observers from the task at hand, for instance, by fidgeting?
- How flexible is the helper when engaging in *SOLER* behaviors? To what degree do these behaviors help the counselor be with the client effectively?
- How natural is the helper in attending to the client? Are there any indications that the helper is not being himself or herself?
- From an attending point of view, what does the helper need to do to become more effectively present to his or her clients?

More important than nonverbal behavior in itself is the total quality of your being with and working with your clients. Your posture and nonverbal behavior are a part of your presence, but there is more to presence than *SOLER* activities. Since quality of presence involves both internal attitudes and external behaviors, trainees should not become preoccupied with the micro-skills of attending.

II. EXERCISES IN ACTIVE LISTENING

Read the sections on listening in Chapter Five of *The Skilled Helper*. Effective helpers are active listeners. When you listen to clients, you listen to them discussing:

- their **experiences**, what they see as happening *to* them;
- their **behaviors**, what they do or fail to do;
- their **affect**, the feelings and emotions that arise from their experiences and behaviors; and
- their **points of view** in talking about their experiences, behaviors, and feelings.

Helpers listen carefully in order to be able to respond both with understanding and to help clients challenge themselves. Clients' experiences, behaviors, feelings, and points of view constitute the *building blocks* of both empathic understanding and challenging.

Experiences, behaviors, and feelings can be either overt (capable of being seen by others) or covert (not seen by others, hidden "inside" the speaker).

- **Overt experience:** "He yelled at me."
- **Covert experience:** "Thoughts about death come out of nowhere and flood my mind."

- **Overt behavior:** "I spend about three hours every night in some bar."
- **Covert behavior:** "Before she comes over I plan everything I'm going to say."
- **Overt emotion (expressed):** "I got very angry and shouted at her."
- **Covert emotion: (felt, but not expressed):** "I was delighted that he failed, but I didn't let on."

You can learn a great deal about clients by listening to the mix of experiences, behaviors, and feelings they discuss and how specific or vague they are.

EXERCISE 8: LISTENING TO YOUR OWN FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

If you are to listen to the feelings and emotions of clients, you first should be familiar with your own emotional states. A number of emotional states are listed below. You are asked to describe what you feel when you feel these emotions. Describe what you feel as *concretely* as possible: How does your body react? What happens inside you? What do you feel like doing? Consider the following examples.

Example 1 — Accepted:

When I feel accepted,

- I feel warm inside.
- I feel safe.
- I feel free to be myself.
- I feel like sitting back and relaxing.
- I feel I can let my guard down.
- I feel like sharing myself.
- I feel some of my fears easing away.
- I feel at home.
- I feel at peace.
- I feel my loneliness drifting away.

Example 2 — Scared:

When I feel scared,

- my mouth dries up.
- my bowels become loose.
- there are butterflies in my stomach.
- I feel like running away.
- I feel very uncomfortable.
- I feel the need to talk to someone.
- I turn in on myself.
- I'm unable to concentrate.
- I feel very vulnerable.
- I sometimes feel like crying.

1. Choose four of the emotions listed below or others not on the list. Try your hand at the emotions you have difficulty with. It's important to listen to yourself when you are experiencing emotions that are not easy for you to handle.
2. Picture to yourself situations in which you have actually experienced each of these emotions.
3. Then, as in the example above, write down in detail what you experienced.

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|-----------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1. accepted | 8. competitive | 15. guilty |
| 2. affectionate | 9. confused | 16. hopeful |
| 3. afraid | 10. defensive | 17. hurt |
| 4. angry | 11. desperate | 18. inferior |
| 5. anxious | 12. disappointed | 19. interested |
| 6. attracted | 13. free | 20. intimate |
| 7. bored | 14. frustrated | 21. jealous |

- | | |
|---------------|----------------|
| 22. joyful | 28. satisfied |
| 23. lonely | 29. shocked |
| 24. loving | 30. shy |
| 25. rejected | 31. superior |
| 26. respected | 32. suspicious |
| 27. sad | 33. trusting |

The reason for this exercise is to sensitize yourself to the wide variety of ways in which clients express and name their feelings and emotions.

LISTENING TO EXPERIENCES AND BEHAVIORS

Although the feelings and emotions of clients (not to mention your own) are extremely important, sometimes helpers concentrate too much, or rather too exclusively, on them. Feelings and emotions need to be understood, both by helpers and by clients, in the **context** of the experiences and behaviors that give rise to them. On the other hand, when clients hide their feelings, both from themselves and from others, then it is necessary to listen carefully to cues indicating the existence of suppressed, ignored, or unmanaged emotion.

EXERCISE 9: LISTENING TO KEY EXPERIENCES, BEHAVIORS, AND FEELINGS

Since feelings and emotions do not arise in a vacuum, in this exercise you are asked to "listen to" and identify the kinds of experiences and behaviors that give rise to the client's feelings. In the following cases you are asked to:

1. Listen very carefully to what the client is saying.
2. Identify the client's key experiences, what he or she says is happening to him or her.
3. Identify the client's key behaviors, what he or she is doing or not doing.
4. Identify the key feelings and emotions associated with these experiences and behaviors.

Example: A twenty-seven-year-old man is talking to a minister about a visit with his mother the previous day. "I just don't know what got into me! She kept nagging me the way she always does, asking me why I don't visit her more often. As she went on, I got more and more angry. (He looks away from the counselor down toward the floor.) I finally began screaming at her. I told her to get off my case. (He puts his hands over his face.) I can't believe what I did! I called her a bitch. (Shaking his head.) I called her a bitch about ten times, and then I left and slammed the door in her face."

- a. **Key experiences:** Mother's nagging.
- b. **Key behaviors:** Losing his temper with his mother, yelling at her, calling her a name, slamming the door in her face.
- c. **Feelings/emotions generated:** He feels embarrassed, guilty, ashamed, distraught, extremely disappointed with himself, remorseful.

Note carefully: This man is talking about his anger, the way he let his temper get away from him, but while talking to the minister, he is feeling and expressing the emotions listed above.

1. A woman, 40, married, no children, who has had several sessions with a counselor. She went because she was bored and felt that all the "color" had gone out of her life: "These counseling sessions have really done me a great deal of good! I've worked hard in these sessions, and it's paid off. I enjoy my work more. I actually look forward to meeting new people. My husband and I are talking more seriously and decently to each other. At times he's even tender toward me the way he used to be. Now that I've begun to take charge of myself more and more, there's just so much more freedom in my life!"

a. Client's key experiences:

b. Client's key behaviors:

c. What feelings/emotions do these experiences and behaviors generate?

2. A man, 64, who has been told that he has terminal cancer, speaking to a medical resident: "Why me? Why me? I'm not even that old! I keep looking for answers, and there are none. I've sat for hours in church, and I come away feeling empty. Why me? I don't smoke or anything like that. (He begins to cry.) Look at me. I thought I had some guts. I'm just a slobbering mess. Oh God, why terminal? What are these next months going to be like? (Pause, he stops crying.) Why would you care! I'm just a failure to you guys."

a. Client's key experiences:

b. Client's key behaviors:

c. What feelings/emotions do these experiences and behaviors generate?

3. A woman, 38, unmarried, talking about losing a friend: "My best friend has just turned her back on me. And I don't even know why! (said with great emphasis) From the way she acted, I think she has the idea that I've been talking behind her back. I simply have not! (also said with great emphasis) Damn! This neighborhood is full of spiteful gossips. She should know that. If she's been listening to those foulmouths who just want to stir up trouble. . . . She could at least tell me what's going on."

a. Client's key experiences:

b. Client's key behaviors:

c. What feelings/emotions do these experiences and behaviors generate?

4. A man, 54, talking to a counselor about a situation at work: "I don't know where to turn. They're asking me to do things at work that I just don't think are right. If I don't do them, well, I'll probably be let go. And I don't know where I'm going to get another job at my age in this economy. But if I do what they want me to, I think I could get into trouble, I mean legal trouble. I'd be the fall guy. My head's spinning. I've never had to face anything like this before. Where do I turn?"

a. Client's key experiences:

b. Client's key behaviors:

c. What feelings/emotions do these experiences and behaviors generate?

5. A girl in her late teens who is serving a two-year term in a reformatory speaks to a probation counselor: (She sits silently for a while and doesn't answer any question the counselor puts to her. Then she shakes her head and looks around the room.) "I don't know what I'm doing here. You're the third counselor they've sent me to . . . or is it the fourth? It's a waste of time! Why do they keep making me come here? (She looks straight at the counselor.) Let's fold the show right now. You're not getting anything out of me. Come on, get smart."

a. Client's key experiences:

b. Client's key behaviors:

c. What feelings/emotions do these experiences and behaviors generate?

Supplemental exercises are found in Appendix Two.

EXERCISE 10: LISTENING TO THE CLIENT'S POINT OF VIEW

Empathic listening involves listening to and understanding the client's point of view in terms of experiences, behaviors, and feelings. Even when you think the client's point of view needs to be challenged, it is essential to hear it. The following instructions apply to all three of the following client summaries.

1. Read the paragraph. Try to picture the clients saying what they say. Listen carefully.
2. Go over the paragraph sentence by sentence. Identify experiences, behaviors, and feelings.
3. Summarize the client's point of view in terms of key experiences, key behaviors, and key feelings and emotions. Do not evaluate it or contaminate it with your own point of view.

1. The following client is a 40-year-old woman who has just lost her job. She is talking about the events before, at the time, and after she was fired. "Yesterday I was talking with one of the punch-press operators when my boss storms in and begins raking me over the coals for a work stoppage I had nothing to do with. I stood there in shock. I was so angry that I wanted to yell back at him, but I kept my cool. But all day I couldn't get it out of my mind. No matter what I was doing, it haunted me. I finally got so angry that I burst into his office and told him just what I thought of him. I even let him have it for a few lousy things he's done in the past. He fired me on the spot. Last night I was pretty depressed. And all day today I've been trying to figure out where I can get a new job or maybe how I can get my old job back."

What is this client's point of view?

2. This client is a 37-year-old man who is talking to a counselor for the first time. He has been referred by a doctor who has found no physical basis for a variety of somatic complaints. "My wife keeps putting me down. For instance, last week she got a job without even discussing it with me. She didn't even ask me how I'd feel. She doesn't share what's going on inside. She makes big decisions without letting me in on the process. I'm sure she sees me as weak and ineffectual. She's just like her mother. My mother-in-law never wanted me to marry her. She was too good for me. Now my wife does everything to prove that her mother is right. She would never admit it, of course, but that's the way she is. I wouldn't be surprised if her goal is to earn more money than I do. I see other guys getting divorces for a lot less than I have to put up with. But that would make both of them happy. I asked her to come with me to see you, and she laughed at me, she actually laughed at me."

What is this client's point of view?

3. The following is a 24-year-old gay male who recently learned that he had tested positive for the HIV virus. He has received counseling to help him deal with the shock through the clinic where he was tested. Now, about two months later, he is talking to a different counselor. "I'm sort of over the initial shock, that is, if you're ever over the shock. But now I'm trying to put my life back together again. I'm finding that my desire for sex is not any less than it was before. I got the virus because I was a bit too promiscuous and not careful enough. But I want to be with people again. Being gay, I know, means being more promiscuous than if I were straight. I can't seem to help it. It's the way I am — the way we are. Anyway, being tied down to one person, well, who'd have me now? I've got to find a way of straightening this all out."

What is this client's point of view?

Share your summaries of each of these client's point of view with your learning partner. First discuss just the client's point of view. Then discuss what you believe needs to be challenged in this point of view.

EXERCISE 11: COMMUNICATING UNDERSTANDING OF ONE ANOTHER'S POINTS OF VIEW

Another person's point of view is made up not only of experiences, behaviors, and feelings but also the interpretation or the slant the person gives to these. Empathy, then, includes this slant, even though you think the slant needs to be challenged. Challenging a person's interpretations of his or her experiences, behaviors, and feelings may be necessary. This is dealt with in Step I-B of the helping model.

1. Divide into groups of three. The roles in each group are speaker, listener, and observer.
2. Take a few minutes to prepare a statement on an issue that you believe to be important. You may jot down a few notes, but the statement is to be spoken, not read. You can provide a bit of context, but the statement should be relatively short.
3. After determining who is to go first, the speaker delivers his or her statement to the listener, while the observer watches.
4. The listener listens carefully and then summarizes the speaker's point of view in the third person. The listener begins with the phrase: "This, I believe, is the speaker's point of view." The listener's summary should be relatively brief and deal with the speaker's core message or messages.

5. The observer gives feedback to the listener on his or her conciseness and accuracy.
6. The process continues until each member of the group has played all three roles.

Example: Janine is the first to take the speaker's role. She says: "As you can tell, I have a speech defect. As you might not be able to tell, at least not immediately, I'm also fairly bright. Also, while I'm not a stunning beauty, I'm not that bad looking. But the first thing a lot of people latch onto is the speech problem. I have more than a sneaking suspicion that this colors their view of me. My looks and my intelligence are seen through the filter of my speech. Often enough, I get discounted. I'm not exactly blaming people for that. It's so easy to do. But it leaves me feeling defensive much of the time. And I find that very uncomfortable."

Bernice, in the listener's role, summarizes Janine's point of view like this: "This, I believe, is Janine's point of view. She's angry at people because they don't take her as she is. She'd like to tell them about herself, but they don't want to listen. She has to defend herself all the time, and that's annoying."

Carla, in the observer role, gives feedback to Bernice: "I think the main message is correct: Janine wants to be taken for the full person she is despite the speech problem. But I heard disappointment rather than anger from Janine. Also she said that she feels defensive much of the time. She didn't say that she goes around defending herself."

Section 6

COMMUNICATION SKILLS II: BASIC EMPATHY AND PROBING

The payoff of attending and listening lies in the ability to communicate to clients an understanding of their experiences and behaviors and the feelings and emotions they generate. Furthermore, listening to clients' points of view enables you to let them know that you see their point of view even when you think that this point of view needs to be challenged or transcended. There are two parts to this section. Part I focuses on empathy; Part II adds the skill of probing.

I. COMMUNICATING UNDERSTANDING: EXERCISES IN BASIC EMPATHY

Basic empathy is the communication to another person of your understanding of his or her point of view with respect to his or her experiences, behaviors, and feelings. It is a skill you need throughout the helping model. Focusing on the client's point of view without necessarily agreeing with it is very useful in establishing and developing relationships with clients and in helping them clarify both problem situations and unexploited opportunities, in setting goals, and in developing strategies and plans. The starting point of the entire helping process and each of its steps is the client's point of view, even when it needs to be challenged.

The exercises in the previous section emphasized your ability to listen to and understand the client's point of view. The exercises in this section relate to your ability to communicate this understanding to the client.

EXERCISE 12: COMMUNICATING UNDERSTANDING OF A CLIENT'S FEELINGS

When feelings and emotions do constitute a part of a client's core message, an understanding of

them needs to be communicated to him or her. Clients express feelings, and helpers can communicate an understanding of feelings in a variety of ways:

- **By single words:** I feel good. I'm depressed. I feel abandoned. I'm delighted. I feel trapped. I'm angry.
- **By different kinds of phrases:** I'm sitting on top of the world. I feel down in the dumps. I feel left in the lurch. I feel tip top. My back's up against the wall. I'm really steaming.
- **By what is implied in a behavioral statement (what action I feel like taking):** I feel like giving up (implied emotion: despair). I feel like hugging you (implied emotion: joy). I feel like smashing him in the face (implied emotion: severe anger). Now that it's over, I feel like throwing up (implied emotion: disgust).
- **By what is implied in experiences that are revealed:** I feel I'm being dumped on (implied feeling: anger). I feel I'm being stereotyped (implied feeling: resentment). I feel I'm at the top of her list (implied feeling: elation). I feel I'm going to catch my lunch (implied feeling: apprehension). Note that the implication of each could be spelled out: I feel angry because I'm being dumped on. I resent the fact that I'm being stereotyped. I feel great because I believe I'm at the top of her list. I'm apprehensive because I think I'm going to catch my lunch.

1. A number of situations involving different kinds of feelings and emotions are listed below. Picture yourself talking to this person.
2. Use two of the four ways of communicating understanding of the client's feelings listed below.

Example: Sally tells you that she has just been given the kind of job she has been looking for for the past two years.

- **Single word:** You're really happy.
- **A phrase:** You're on cloud nine.
- **Experiential statement:** You feel you got what you deserve.
- **Behavioral statement:** You feel like going out and celebrating.

Now express the following feelings and emotions in two different ways (single word, phrase, experiential statement, and/or behavioral statement).

1. This woman is about to go to her daughter's graduation from college: "I never thought that my daughter would make it through. I've invested a lot of money in her education. But more to the point, a lot of emotion. Now the day has arrived!"

2. This woman has just had her purse stolen. She's talking to a policewoman. "I had just cashed my bi-weekly paycheck, and the money was in the purse. I've had a streak of bad luck. My sister

was in an auto accident last week. And my only son was detained by the police for a minor theft earlier this week. There has not been much good news at all."

3. This man is waiting for the results of medical tests. He is talking to a hospital volunteer: "I've been losing weight for about two months and feeling tired and listless all the time. I'm afraid of what these tests are going to say. I've been putting them off. Well, now the waiting's getting to me. I . . . well, I just don't know where I stand. Nobody said anything to me during the tests."

4. A prospective employer has just found out that this client has a criminal record: "I had hoped that I would get the job and prove myself before anyone found out about my record. I guess I was just stupid. I've just received a call from him telling me that I'm no longer being considered for the job. Well, I did what I thought was right. I never had the intention of deceiving anyone. I'm going to make it, somehow."

5. This woman has just lost a custody case for her children (during the interview she seems almost in a daze): "I never dreamed that the court would award custody to my husband. He's so selfish and spiteful. It's all over now."

3. Compare your responses with those of your learning partner. Then see if the two of you can improve upon your combined responses.

Supplemental exercises are found in Appendix Two.

EXERCISE 13: USING A FORMULA TO EXPRESS EMPATHY

Empathy focuses on the client's key messages — key experiences and/or key behaviors plus the feelings and emotions they generate. In this exercise you are asked to use the formula explained in the text: "You feel . . ." (followed by the right emotion and some indication of its intensity) "because. . ." (followed by the key experiences and/or behaviors that give rise to the emotion).

Example: A woman in a self-help group is talking about a relationship with a man. She says: "He began being abusive, calling me names, describing my defects. Even though I've talked about this in this group, I sat there very passively and just took it. I just took it!" A group member replies: "You feel very annoyed with yourself because you let him get away with it again even though you knew better."

1. First-year college student talking to counselor in the Center for Student Services: "Jane and Sue showed up at the party in dresses *and* with dates. And there I was, alone and in slacks! I mean, just typical of me!"

2. Man, 65, talking to a mental health counselor: "My wife died last year, and this year my youngest son went away to college. The other children are married. So now that I'm retired, I spend a lot of time rambling around a house that's . . . (pauses, looks out the window for a while) . . . really too big for me."

3. Married woman, 33, having a "solo" session with a marriage counselor: "I can't believe it! Tom came home on time for supper every day last week. I never thought he would live up to the contract we made. And yet, there he was, each and every night."

4. Man, 40, talking about his invalid mother to a minister at his church: "She uses her illness to control me. It's a pattern; she's been controlling me all her life. (He grits his teeth and sets his jaw.) I bet she'll even make me feel responsible for her death."

5. Young woman, 25, talking about her current boyfriend to an older confidante: "I can't quite figure him out. I still can't tell if he really cares about me, or if he's just trying to get me into bed. It leaves everything up in the air."

Supplemental exercises are found in Appendix Two.

EXERCISE 14: USING YOUR OWN WORDS TO EXPRESS EMPATHY

In this exercise you are asked to do two things:

1. Use the "you feel . . . because . . ." formula to communicate empathy to the client.
2. Recast your response in your own words while still identifying both feelings and the experiences and/or behaviors that underlie the feelings. But avoid advice giving.

Example: A married woman, 31, is talking to a counselor about her marriage: "I can't believe it! You know when Tom and I were here last week we made a contract that said that he would be home for supper every evening and on time. Well, he came home on time every day this past week. I never dreamed that he would live up to his part of the bargain so completely!"

- **Formula.** "You feel great because he really stuck to his word!"
- **Non-formula.** "He really surprised you by doing it right!"

Now imagine yourself listening intently to each of the following clients. First use the "You feel . . . because . . ." formula; then use your own words. Try to make the second response sound as natural (as much like yourself) as possible. After you use your own words, check to see if you have both a "you feel" part and a "because" part in your response.

1. A man, 40, is talking about his invalid mother: "I know she's using her illness to control me. How could a 'good' son refuse any of her requests at a time like this? (He pounds his fist on the arm of his chair.) But it's all part of a pattern. She's used one thing or another to control me all my life. If I let things go on like this, she'll make me feel responsible for her death!"

a. Use the formula.

b. Use your own words.

2. A woman, 25, talking about her current boyfriend: "I can't quite figure him out. (She pauses, shakes her head slowly, and then speaks quite slowly.) I just can't figure out whether he really cares about me or if he's just trying to get me into bed. I've been burned before; I don't want to get burned again."

a. Use the formula.

b. Use your own words.

3. A businessman, 38, talking to a company counselor: "I really don't know what my boss wants. I don't know what he thinks of me. He tells me I'm doing fine even though I don't think that I'm doing anything special. Then he blows up over nothing at all. I keep asking myself if there's something wrong with me, I mean, that I don't see what's getting him to act the way he does. I'm beginning to wonder if this is the right job for me."

a. Use the formula.

b. Use your own words.

4. A woman, 73, in the hospital with a broken hip: "When you get old, you have to expect things like this to happen. It could have been much worse. When I lie here, I keep thinking of the people in the world who are a lot worse off than I am. I'm not a complainer. Oh, I'm not saying that this is fun or that the people in this place give you the best service — who does these days? — but it's a good thing that these hospitals exist. Think of those who don't have anything."

a. Use the formula.

b. Use your own words.

5. A seventh-grade girl to her teacher, outside class: "My classmates don't like me, and right now I don't like them! Why do they have to be so mean? They make fun of me — well, they make fun of my clothes. My family can't afford what some of those dopes wear. Gee, they don't have to like me, but I wish they'd stop making fun of me."

a. Use the formula.

b. Use your own words.

Supplemental exercises are found in Appendix Two.

EXERCISE 15: EMPATHY WITH CLIENTS FACING DILEMMAS

Clients sometimes talk about conflicting values, experiences, behaviors, and emotions. Responding with empathy means communicating an understanding of the conflict. Consider the following example.

Example: A woman, 32, talking to a counselor about adopting a child: "I'm going back and forth, back and forth. I say to myself, 'I really want a child,' but then I think about Bill [her husband] and his reluctance. He so wants our own child and is so reluctant to raise someone else's. We

don't even know why we can't have children. But the fertility specialists don't offer us much hope. At times when I so want to be a mother I think I should marry someone who would be willing to adopt a child. But I love Bill and don't want to point an accusing finger at him."

- **Identify the conflict or dilemma.** She believes that she runs the risk of alienating her husband if she insists on adopting a child, even though she strongly favors adoption.
- **Formula.** "You feel trapped between your desire to be a mother and your love for your husband."
- **Non-formula.** "You're caught in the middle. Adopting a child would solve one problem but perhaps create another."

1. A factory worker, 30: "Work is okay. I do make a good living, and both my family and I like the money. My wife and I are both from poor homes, and we're living much better than we did when we were growing up. But the work I do is the same thing day after day. I may not be the world's brightest person, but there's a lot more to me than I use on those machines."

a. The conflict.

b. Use the formula.

c. Use your own words.

2. A mental hospital patient, 54, who has spent five years in the hospital; he is talking to the members of an ongoing therapy group. Some of the members have been asking him what he's doing to get out. They point out the tendency to "push people out." He says, "To tell the truth, I like it here. I'm safe and secure. So why are so many people here so damn eager to see me out? Is it a crime because I feel comfortable here? (Pause, then in a more conciliatory voice.) I know you're all interested in me. I see that you care. But do I have to please you by doing something I don't want to do?"

a. The conflict.

b. Use the formula.

c. Use your own words.

3. A juvenile probation officer to a colleague: "These kids drive me up the wall. Sometimes I think I'm really stupid for doing this kind of work. They taunt me. They push me as far as they can. To some of them I'm just another 'pig.' But every time I think of quitting — and this gets me — I know I'd miss the work and even miss the kids one way or another. When I wake up in the morning, I know the day's going to be full and it's going to demand everything I've got."

a. *The conflict.*

b. Use the formula.

c. Use your own words.

EXERCISE 16: THE PRACTICE OF EMPATHY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

If the communication of accurate empathy is to become a part of your natural communication style, you will have to practice it outside formal training sessions. That is, it must become part of your everyday communication style or it will tend to lack genuineness in helping situations. Practicing empathy "out there" is a relatively simple process.

1. **Empathy as an improbable event.** Empathy is not a normative response in everyday conversations. Find this out for yourself. Observe everyday conversations. Count how many times empathy is used as a response in any given conversation.

2. **Your own use of empathy.** Next try to observe how often you use empathy as part of your normal style. In the beginning, don't try to increase the number of times you use empathy in day-to-day conversations. Merely observe your usual behavior. What part does empathy normally play in your style?

3. **Increasing your empathic responses.** Begin to increase the number of times you use accurate empathy. Be as natural as possible. Do not overwhelm others with this response; rather, try to incorporate it gradually into your style. You will probably discover that there are quite a few opportunities for using empathy without being phony. Keep some sort of record of how often you use empathy in any given conversation.

4. **The impact of empathy.** Observe the impact your use of empathy has on others. Don't set out to use others for the purpose of experimentation. But, as you gradually increase your use of this communication skill naturally, try to see how it influences your conversations. What impact does it have on you? What impact does it have on others?

5. **Learnings.** In a forum set up by the instructor, discuss with your fellow trainees what you have learned from this "experiment."

If empathy becomes part of your communication style "out there," then you should appear more and more natural in using empathy in the training program, both in playing the role of the helper and in listening and providing feedback to your fellow trainees. On the other hand, if you use empathy only in the training sessions, it will most likely remain artificial.

II. EXERCISES IN THE USE OF PROBES

It is not enough to help clients choose problems, issues, or concerns that make a difference. Once a problem situation is chosen, the specific issues within it need to be identified. If Connie and Chuck want to deal with the poor communication they have with each other in their marriage, then the key issues relating to communication or the lack thereof need to be identified and explored. You do this by using empathy, probing, and challenge to achieve the kind of problem clarity that can lead to goal setting and strategy formulation. A problem or unused opportunity is clear if it is spelled out in terms of specific experiences, specific behaviors, and specific feelings in specific situations. To do the next four exercises well, you are asked to use probes with yourself – probes such as "Could you make that more specific? What else? What do you mean by that?" Once you appreciate what it takes to talk concretely and specifically about your own issues, then it will be easier for you to use probes to help clients do the same.

EXERCISE 17: SELF-PROBING – SPEAKING CONCRETELY ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES

Clients often speak too vaguely about their problems. Helpers often go "round the mulberry bush" with them, allowing them to be too general. Vague problems lead only to vague solutions that tend to be worthless. Since problem situations need to be spelled out in terms of experiences, behaviors, and feelings, we start with experiences, your experiences. In this

exercise, you are asked to speak of some of your experiences, first vaguely, then concretely; that is, you are asked to use probes such as Who? What? When? Where? How? to force yourself to speak more specifically.

Example 1: George, a counselor trainee, discusses his "inefficiency."

- **Vague statement of experience.** "I'm sometimes less efficient than I could be because of headaches."
- **Concrete statement of the same experience.** "I get migraine headaches about once a week. They make me extremely sensitive to light and usually cause severe pain. I often get so sick that I throw up. They happen more often when I'm tense or under a lot of pressure. For instance, I often come away from a visit with my ex-wife with one. Each week they rob me of productive hours of work, either at work or at home."

Example 2: Jane, a counselor trainee, discusses her marriage.

- **Vague statement of experience.** "My marriage is falling apart."
- **Concrete statement of the same experience.** "My husband is going around with other women, though he won't admit it. He never asks me to have sex, though occasionally it 'happens.' He is verbally abusive at times, though he has never hit me. I keep most of this to myself."

1. In the spaces following, explore three experiences, things you see as happening *to* you, that are related to some problem situation or situations of your own. Choose issues that might affect the quality of your helping.

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

2. Share one or two of these with a learning partner. Get feedback on how clear your statement is. If you do not think that your partner's statement is as clear as it might be, use probes to help him or her make the statement clearer.

EXERCISE 18: SELF-PROBING – SPEAKING CONCRETELY ABOUT YOUR BEHAVIOR

In this exercise, you are asked to speak about some of your behaviors (what you do or fail to do) that are involved in some problem situation. As in the preceding exercise, start with a vague statement, then clarify it with the kind of detail needed to serve the problem-management process. Choose a problem situation that might affect you in your role as helper.

Example 1: Karen writes about her tendency to dominate.

- **Vague statement of behavior.** "I tend to be domineering."
- **Concrete statement of the same behavior.** "I try, usually in subtle ways, to get others to do what I want to do. I even pride myself on this. In conversations, I take the lead. I interrupt others, jokingly and in a good-natured way, but I make my points. If a friend is talking about something serious when I'm not in the mood to hear it, I change the subject."

Example 2: Eric discusses his relationship with his wife.

- **Vague statement of behavior.** "I don't treat my wife right."
- **Concrete statement of the same behavior.** "When I come home from work, I read the paper and watch some TV. I don't talk much to my wife except a bit at supper. I don't share the little things that went on in my day. Neither do I encourage her to talk about what happened to her. Still, if I feel like having sex later, I expect her to hop in bed with me willingly."

1. In the spaces below, deal with three instances of your own behavior. Stick to describing what you do or fail to do rather than experiences or feelings. Choose situations and behaviors that are relevant to your role as helper.

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

2. Share one or two of these with your learning partner. Get feedback on how clear your second statement is. If you do not think that someone's statement is as clear as it might be, use probes to help your fellow trainee make his or her statement clearer.

EXERCISE 19: SELF-PROBING — SPEAKING CONCRETELY ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS

Feelings and emotions arise from experiences and behaviors. Therefore, it is unrealistic to talk about feelings without relating them to experiences or behaviors. However, in this exercise try to emphasize the feelings. Read the following examples.

Example 1: Jamie talking about how the training group affects him.

- **Vague statement of feelings.** "I get bothered in training groups."
- **Concrete statement of the same feelings.** "I feel hesitant and embarrassed whenever I want to give feedback to other trainees, especially if it is in any way negative. When the time comes, my heart beats faster and my palms sweat. I feel like everyone is staring at me."

Example 2: Renata talking about her relationship with her mother.

- **Vague statement of feelings.** "I feel unsettled at times with my mother."
- **Concrete statement of the same feelings.** "I feel guilty and depressed whenever my mother calls and implies that she's lonely. I then get angry with myself for giving in to guilt so easily. Then the whole day has a pall over it. I get nervous and irritable and show it to others."

1. In the spaces below, deal with three instances of your own feelings. Try to focus on feelings that you have some trouble managing and that could interfere with your role as helper.

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

2. Share one or two of these with your learning partner. Get feedback on how clear your second statement is. If you do not think that someone's statement is as clear as it might be, use probes to help your fellow trainee make his or her statement clearer.

EXERCISE 20: SELF-PROBING — TELLING YOUR STORY CONCRETELY

In this exercise, you are asked to bring together all three elements — specific experiences, specific behaviors, and specific feelings — in talking about some personal concerns. Study the following examples.

Example:

- **Vague statement.** "Sometimes I'm a rather overly sensitive and spiteful person."
- **Concrete statement.** "I do not take criticism well. When I receive almost any kind of negative feedback, I usually smile and seem to shrug it off, but inside I begin to pout. Also, deep inside, I put the person who gave me the feedback on a 'list.' I say to myself that that person is going to pay for what he or she did. I find this hard to admit, even to myself. It sounds so petty. For instance, two weeks ago in the training group I received some negative feedback from Cindy. I felt angry and hurt because I thought she was my 'friend.' Since then I've tried to see what mistakes she makes here. I've been looking for an opportunity to get back at her. I've even felt bad because I haven't been able to catch her in any kind of glaring mistake. It goes without saying that I'm embarrassed to say all this."

Pick out the experiences, behaviors, and feelings in this example. Discuss to what degree the detail offered gets at the core of the problem situation.

1. Talk about two situations in terms of your own specific experiences, behaviors, and feelings. Deal with themes that relate to your potential effectiveness as a helper. Choose detail that gets at the core of the problem or unused opportunity.

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

a. **Vague.** _____

b. **Concrete.** _____

EXERCISE 21: PROBING FOR CLARITY OF EXPERIENCES, BEHAVIORS, AND FEELINGS

A probe is a statement or a question that invites a client to discuss an issue more fully. In the previous exercises you were asked to probe yourself. Probes are ways of getting at important details that clients do not think of or are reluctant to talk about. They can be used at any point in the helping process to clarify issues, search for missing data, expand perspectives, and point toward possible client actions. An overuse of probes can lead to gathering a great deal of irrelevant information. The purpose of a probe is not information for its own sake but data — experiences, behaviors, and feelings — that serve the process of problem management and opportunity development.

In this exercise, brief problem situations will be presented. Your job is to formulate two possible probes.

1. First respond with empathy.
2. Formulate a number of probes you might use with the client.
3. Jot down your reasons for using each probe.
4. In debriefing this exercise, give each other feedback on the quality of the empathy used.
5. Share with your learning partner your probes and your reasons for using each.
6. See if you can come to some agreement on which probes might work best.

Example: A man, 24, complains that he is severely tempted to go on experimenting sexually with women other than his wife: "Although I have not had an extended affair, I have had a few sexual encounters and feel that some day I will pursue a longer relationship. I don't blame myself or her. It's just that my feelings are so strong that she cannot satisfy me. I want more affection — really, more lust — than she can possibly give. I fear that no one woman will do so. I'm not sure what to think. I don't know whether I'm just being selfish or whether I just need to experiment more with relationships. I keep asking myself what all this means."

- a. **Empathic statement.** "Your sexual urges are so strong that right now they're in the driver's seat. But you're not quite sure what all this is about and where it is leading."
- b. **Possible probes.** "When you ask yourself what all this means, what are some of the answers you come up with?" "Tell me a bit about what you mean by 'selfish' here." "I'm not sure how much of this, if any, you've shared with your wife."

1. Grace, 19, an unmarried, first-year college student, comes to counseling because of an unexpected and unwanted pregnancy: "Right now I realize that the father could be either of two guys. That probably says something about me right there. I'm not sure what I want to do about the baby. I haven't told my parents yet, but I think that they will be sympathetic. But I've gotten myself into this mess, and I have to get myself out."

- a. First, give an empathic response.
-
-

b. What are some probes that might help the client tell her story more fully?

2. You are a counselor in a halfway house. You are dealing with Tom, 44, who has just been released from prison where he served two years for armed robbery. He has been living at the halfway house for two weeks. That is the only offense for which he has ever been convicted. The halfway house experience is designed to help him reintegrate himself into society. Living in the house is voluntary. The immediate problem is that Tom came in drunk a couple of nights ago. He was supposed to be out on a job-search day. Drinking is against the rules of the house. When you talk to him, he mumbles vaguely, something about "still being confused."

a. First, give an empathic response.

b. What are some probes that might help the client tell his story more fully?

3. Arnie is a born-again Christian. He has begun to do a fair amount of preaching at his place of employment. While some of his co-workers sympathize with his views, others are turned off. Since he feels that he is being driven by a "clear vision," he becomes more and more militant. His supervisor has cautioned him a couple of times, but this has done little to change Arnie's behavior. Finally, he is given an ultimatum to talk to one of the counselors in the Employee Assistance Program about these issues or be suspended from his job. He says to the counselor, "I have a duty to spread the word. And if I have a duty to do so, then I also have the right. I'm a good worker. In fact, I believe in hard work. So it's not like I'm taking time off for the Lord's work. Now what's wrong with that?"

a. First, give an empathic response.

b. What are some probes that might help the client tell his story more fully?

Since, like empathy, probes can be used to good effect throughout the helping process, some work on probes will be included in later exercises.

EXERCISE 22: COMBINING EMPATHY WITH PROBES FOR CLARITY AND CLIENT ACTION

This exercise asks you to combine several skills — the ability to be empathic, to identify areas needing clarification, and to use probes to make clients aware of the need for action. Remember that each step of the helping process should be, all things considered, some kind of stimulus for client action, the "little" actions, as it were, that precede formal action based on a plan.

1. First reply to the client with empathy.
2. Identify an area needing exploration and clarification.
3. Use a probe to help the client explore or clarify some issue.
4. On the assumption that you have spent time understanding the client and helping him or her explore the problem situation through empathy and probes, indicate what action possibilities you might probe for.

Example 1: A law student, 25, is talking to a school counselor: "I learned yesterday that I've flunked out of school and that there's no recourse. I've seen everybody, but the door is shut tight. What a mess! I know I haven't gotten down to business the way I should. This is my first year in a large city, and there are so many distractions. And school is so competitive. I have no idea how I'll face my parents. They've paid for my college education and this year of law school. And now I'll have to tell them that it's all down the drain."

- a. **Empathy.** "The whole situation sounds pretty desperate both here and at home. And it sounds so final."
- b. **An area for probing.** It is not clear whom the client saw and what specific responses he received.

- c. **Probe for clarity.** "I'm not sure who you mean by 'everybody,' and what doors were actually shut?"
- d. **Probes for action possibilities.** Could he make further appeals? What advice would he give his brother if he were in this mess? How can he cut his losses? What might an honest appeal to his parents look like?

1. A high school senior to a school counselor: "My dad told me the other night that I looked relaxed. Well, that's a joke. I don't feel relaxed. There's a lull right now, because of semester break, but next semester I'm signed up for two math courses, and math really rips me up. But I need it for science, since I want to go into pre-med."

- a. **Empathy.**

- b. **Fruitful area for probing.**

- c. **Probe.**

- d. **Probes for action possibilities.**

2. A woman, 27, talking to a counselor about a relationship that has just ended (she speaks in a rather matter-of-fact voice): "About three weeks ago I came back from visiting my parents who live in Nevada and found a letter from my friend Gary. He said that he still loves me but that I'm just not the person for him. In the letter he thanked me for all the good times we had together these last three years. He asked me not to try to contact him because this would only make it more difficult for both of us. End of story. I guess I've let my world collapse. People at work have begun complaining about me. And I've been like a zombie most of the time."

a. Empathy.

b. Fruitful area for probing.

c. Probe.

d. Probes for action possibilities.

3. A married man, 25, talking to a counselor about trouble with his mother-in-law: "The way I see it, she is really trying to destroy our marriage. She's so conniving. And she's very clever. It's hard to catch her in what she's doing. You know, it's rather subtle. Well, I've had it! If she's trying to destroy our marriage, she's getting pretty close to achieving her goal."

a. Empathy.

b. Fruitful area for probing.

c. Probe.

d. Probes for action possibilities.

4. A woman, 31, talking to an older woman friend: "I just can't stand my job any more! My boss is so unreasonable. He makes all sorts of silly demands on me. The other women in the office are so stuffy, you can't even talk to them. The men are either very blah or after you all the time, you know, on the make. The pay is good, but I don't think it makes up for all the rest. It's been going on like this for almost two years."

a. Empathy.

b. Fruitful area for probing.

c. Probe.

d. Probes for action possibilities.

5. A man, 45, who has lost his wife and home in a tornado, has been talking about his loss to a social worker: "This happened to a friend of mine in Kansas about ten years ago. He never recovered from it. His life just disintegrated, and nobody could do anything about it. . . . It was like the end of the world for him. You never think it's going to happen to you. I know I belong here. But this kind of thing makes me think I don't."

a. Empathy.

b. Fruitful area for probing.

c. Probe.

d. Probes for action possibilities.

Supplemental exercises are found in Appendix Two.