

When we can't see one another:

Empathic Communication on the phone

I have a clear memory of one particular conversation. I was sitting in my car, parked, crying, talking to my friend Lara. It was 2002, my marriage was ending, and I was in the midst of this seemingly endless and painful process. Why would I remember this conversation so well? I don't remember the exact content; I remember how I felt during and afterward. Lara is one of the best and most empathic communicators I know, and afterward, I felt deeply connected to her, and as a result, to myself. What is remarkable is that the conversation was on the phone.

Most of us, at some point, have read that body language accounts for the majority of communication. This is accurate! Studies have found that when we are communicating with someone, words account for about 10% of the overall message. Tone of voice accounts for about 40%, and body language accounts for the remaining 50%.

As helping professionals (and as family members!) we likely unconsciously and consciously show care and empathy during conversations by maintaining eye contact, mirroring others facial expressions and mood, leaning towards them, smiling, nodding, and sometimes touching them.

As people who understand the deep importance of empathic communication in relationship-based care, and the development and maintenance of the therapeutic alliance, how can we mitigate the loss of 50% of our communication, in order to continue to be effective, helpful therapists?

The following are some tips, hints and tricks for engaging in high quality, connected conversations on the phone – with patients, or family members and friends.

- **Set the foundation:** This is the most important sentence in this document: **We are unable to listen and communicate skillfully when we are doing something else.** Avoid talking on the phone while looking at a computer, paperwork, or anything else that draws attention. Avoid typing while communicating on the phone. For me, looking down at my lap works the best, helping me focus just on the person I'm talking to. Sometimes walking outside can work well too, as long as the walk is quiet and doesn't take any concentration.
- **Demonstrate attentiveness to other's comfort:** When someone is with us physically, we can assume it was a time that worked for them, and that they are alone. On the phone, it is important to begin by asking if this is still a good time to talk, and if they are comfortable. Asking whether they feel they have sufficient privacy is important too.
- **Normalize:** Initiate a conversation about the experience and process of phone communication. Just saying 'I know it is a bit different, for us to engage in therapy/counseling this way. It can feel pretty odd. What are your thoughts, questions or concerns?' We can also check in at the end, to ask about the experience.
- **Reflecting listening** becomes much more important, as we lose nodding and eye contact as ways to convey deep listening. Reflective listening is one of the empathic communication skills that takes the most practice and skill to use effectively. If you've shied away from it before, telephone conversations are the time to dive in and practice; ideally, we are reflecting through summarizing, exact words, and double sided reflections. Just as a reminder, reflective listening is repeating back to another, what our understanding is of what they've said. It can start with stems like:
 - It sounds like what you are saying is
 - What I hear you saying is....

However, stems aren't necessary. We can also just repeat back important words or phrases they've used:

- You just wanted a few more years with your grandson...
- You are devastated by the loss....

For more detail on this valuable, and somewhat difficult skill, , see the resources listed at the end of this document.

- **Jump in quickly, to check in.** When we hear the other person trail off, move around; when they are answering open ended questions with one word answers, or there are long silences, we likely were unable to see the earlier cues and clues about how they are responding to the conversation. By the time we actually 'hear' this, it is time to say something. For example: 'I wonder how you are feeling right now in this moment?'
- **Narrate your pauses and process.** In person, others can see us look down thoughtfully, nod, look to the sky in consideration...on the phone, it is just silence, which might be misinterpreted. Comments like 'I'm just thinking about what you just shared...' or 'I want to sit with that, for just a minute. It sounds so important, what you just said' help convey we are still with the other person, as gives the other a visual picture of us in thought.
- **Narrate your smile.** We convey an enormous amount of goodwill, physically, by smiling, close proximity and eye contact. When we smile, for example, at the beginning of the conversation, or in response to what someone is saying, we can verbalize this . 'I'm happy to be talking to you today; and 'I have a big smile on my face right now, hearing you say that'.
- **Affirm strengths more often.** Others are more vulnerable when they can't see us. They can't immediately 'see' how we are responding to them, or how much we care. Particularly with people we don't have a long history with us, affirming strengths is a powerhouse when it comes to conveying of empathy and non-judgment. Stating things like 'I'm so impressed you were willing to give this phone thing a try' or 'I can hear how much effort you are making to keep your family safe during this time' frequently can assure others we have positive regard for them.

For more detail on these and other empathic communication strategies, see www.emorrisonconsulting.com, under the [resources](#) tab.

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