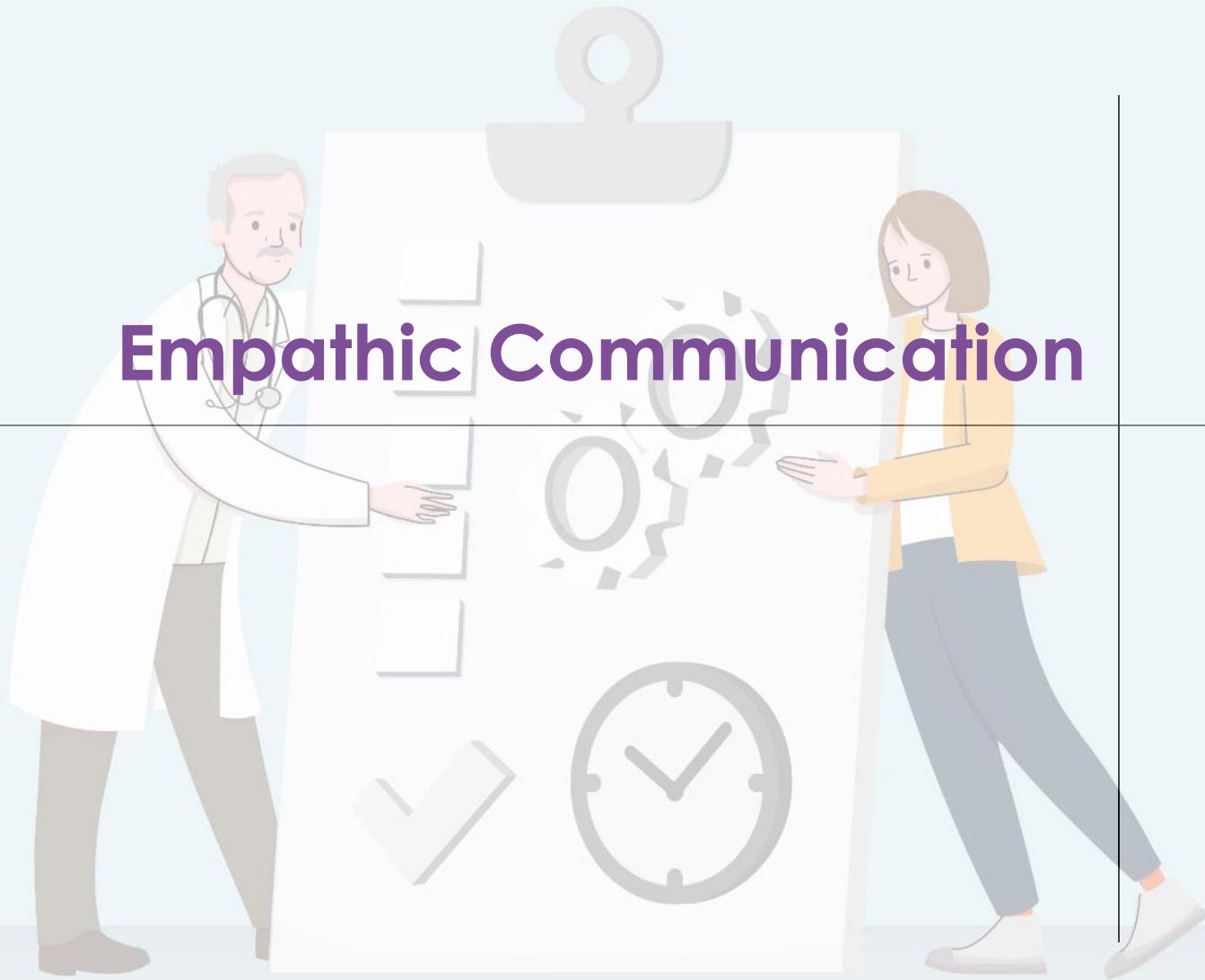


Empathic Communication



What is empathic communication?

- Empathy refers to a person's ability to recognize and understand another person's inner experience (e.g., their feelings, their expectations).
- To cultivate a good bond with patients, healthcare professionals need to try to understand patients
 - both cognitively (what the patient may be thinking)
 - and emotionally (what they may be feeling).

How can a healthcare professional practice empathic communication?

Empathy is a key element in health care and is a skill that can be cultivated in professionals. You can practice it by using the following counselling skills:

- Open-ended questions
- Restatement and Reflection
- Encouragement, Validation and Normalization
- Non-Verbal Skills (eye contact, tone of voice, nods of affirmation)

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions convey an attitude of curiosity, interest in what patients think and feel, and can make them open up.

Advantages:

- They invite patients to express what they are thinking,
- They allow clinicians to see things from their point of view, their beliefs and strengths.

Examples of open-ended questions:

“Tell me more about....”

“What are your thoughts about...?”



Restatement and Reflection

Restatements include repeating back the words that you have heard from the other person, demonstrating that they are paying attention, try to confirm whether they have correctly understood what the patient said and value what the patient has shared.

Examples of restatements:

“It was difficult to stick to the diet.”

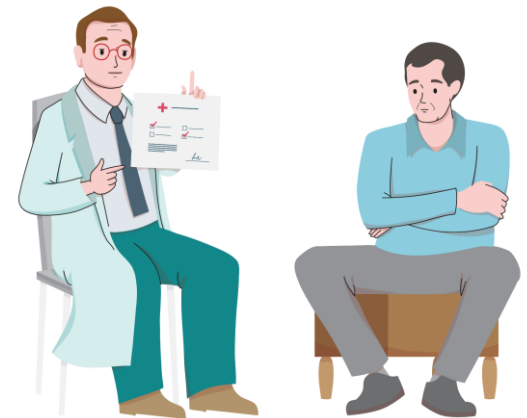
“So, you’re saying that things are going well for you.”

Restatement and Reflection

Reflection entails noticing how the patient feels and putting into words. By using it healthcare professional can infer the feelings from the client's nonverbal and verbal behavior and name them.

Examples of reflection:

“You seem really sad about it”
“I can hear you're anxious...”



Advantages: they can replace questions, encouraging the patient to talk further, and emphasizing that a healthcare professional is willing to hear more, without constantly needing to ask questions.

Encouragement, Validation and Normalization

Encouragement: by giving positive feedback and emphasizing the strengths of patients, the healthcare professional can help the latter remain motivated and have a more active role in their treatment plan.

Examples of encouragement:

"You've really shown a lot of patience."

"You do well to point this out to me."

Encouragement, Validation and Normalization

Validation of the patient's experience is conveyed by phrases whose goal is to express that the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of patients are understandable.

Examples of validation:

"I understand why you were upset."

"Your anxiety is completely understandable."

Normalization is the ability to show patients how thoughts, feelings and behaviour are ordinary and normal.

Examples of normalization:

"Anyone would feel the same."

"Most patients have exactly this reaction."

Non-Verbal Skills

In addition to verbal empathic communication, there is also non-verbal communication.

Sometimes, in fact, verbal communication is more important, since the listener must let the speaker know that they hear and understand what they are saying, but without saying a word.



Non-Verbal Skills

Eye contact

Eye contact plays a key role in human interactions, as we use it to initiate, maintain or avoid communication. Lack of eye contact leads one to feel that the listener is not interested in the conversation and that they avoid getting involved.

Ideally, clinicians should use enough eye contact to communicate to the patient the message that they listen to them, but to withdraw their gaze for some moments, especially when they feel that the patient may be in a difficult position.

Non-Verbal Skills

Tone of voice

The *imperative* tone of voice can discourage the expression of issues that the patients consider important. It would be easier to express your thoughts, and feelings and share more information, when the healthcare professional speaks softly and slowly, rather than loudly and forcefully.

It is helpful for the healthcare professional to speak:

- softly,
- and adjust the pace of their speech in correspondence with the patient's speech rate.

Non-Verbal Skills

Nods of affirmation

Nods of affirmation convey to patients the feeling that the healthcare professional listens and follows what they say.

Using minimal encouragements, which are simple phonemes or words like "*Mmm*" or "*yes*", healthcare professionals can show the patient that they acknowledge and accept what they tell them.

Starting to practice empathic communication in your clinical routine, you will see that the communication and your relationship with patients will improve. You may be thinking that these skills are difficult to apply to everyday working conditions and time pressure... However, once you start using them, they can really make a difference.

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