

Body Language in Patient Counselling

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Counselling has become a basic component of every health care service. Counselling skills are applicable in common daily health care situations to meet specific needs of patients.

Counselling can be defined as means by which one person helps another to make a decision about an issue and act on that decision.

As this communication, plays a vital part in the health sector, the counsellor needs to be skilled in analyzing and evaluating the human behaviour. They need to know about human behaviour and development, relationships, different techniques, social and cultural issues. The patient will always look for empathy, respect and sensitivity from the counsellor. They would like to freely express their real concerns. They expect the counsellor to give careful attention to their concern and maintain confidentiality. So it is necessary for a counsellor to develop good personal qualities and communication skills to help the patient make an informed decision.

Communication is very essential in Counselling. The counsellor should remember that *everything* they do creates an impression. Thus they should be aware of their posture, facial expressions, eye contact, hand gestures, dress etc. Between 60-80% of our message is communicated through our body Language and only 7-10% is attributable to the actual words of a conversation.



Welcoming the patient with a smile

Body Language is the unspoken communication that goes on in every face-to-face encounter with another human being. It informs us the true feelings towards us and how well our words are being received by others. Usually body language occurs unconsciously. Yet the body language we use, decides to a large extent the quality of our communication.

Body language is used especially to express feelings. Face is the most expressive part of the body and so the counselor should always be aware of their facial expressions. If the counsellor is anxious for some reason then his/her facial expression may lead to appear unapproachable, serious, or disinterested. In such situations the counsellor can break this misrepresentation by making a conscious effort to smile. Counsellor's smile is one of the strongest tools, which can make the patient feel relaxed and comfortable. It will help the patient to appear warm, open, friendly, and confident. Sometimes the counsellors may face situations like big crowd waiting before their room and one patient asking numerous questions. Such situations can make them feel irritated but a good counsellor should always keep his/her face cool, calm and smiling because the patients are sensitive to these issues.

Eye contact is one of the most important aspects of dealing with others, especially with the patients. Maintaining good eye contact shows respect and interest in what they have to say. Our eyes give clues to our emotions. Making very little eye contact can either convey that the counsellor's are not giving much importance to their problems. So it is very important for a counsellor to maintain eye contact because it helps the patient to develop trust in them. If the patient finds that the counsellor isn't 'looking' at them when they are being spoken to, they feel uneasy. Always a counsellor should keep in mind

that they have to avoid staring, glaring, or looking away during the process.

Our hands are also very expressive. Open gestures tend to make us appear open and honest. By pointing our finger, or moving our hands closer together, we can draw emphasis to what we are saying. Hand gestures can make us seem enthusiastic and committed to our topic. However, making too many gestures can make us appear nervous and uncontrolled. Wringing our hands or making knots with the saree, touching the face, etc. can make us appear tense, nervous, and sometimes dishonest.

Our posture gives signals about our interest in something, our openness, and attentiveness. The way we hold ourselves, our posture, makes a big contribution to our body language and conveys our level of self-confidence. By orienting our body towards patients, we show attentiveness. By falling away from them or leaning back, we show a lack of interest and some level of reserve. Counsellors should not hunch their shoulders and keep their heads down because this may give an idea that the counsellor is feeling low in confidence and want to hide away. A relaxed body posture will help us to appear and feel more relaxed and confident. It also gives clues as to our status within a group. The way a person stands reflects their level of confidence and comfort level.

Head position is a great one to play around with others and us. To feel confident and self-assured keep the head level both horizontally and vertically. The counsellor can use this straight head position when they want to be authoritative and what they are saying to be taken seriously. Conversely, when we want to be friendly and in the listening, receptive mode, tilt the head just a little to one side or other. We can shift the tilt from left to right at different points in the conversation.

Personal space is important. Distance from others is crucial. The counsellor should make the patient comfortable to the situations. Avoid being too close or too far away physically. (Within two feet is a comfortable range) because being too close can make them uncomfortable or too far can make them feel rejected (depends on the culture).

Vocal cues can predict dishonesty. More and lengthier pauses during conversation will make the patient feel that the counsellor is vague or uncertain. Lot of such sounds as “uh,” “um,” word repetitions will distract the patients. The counsellor should avoid unwanted interference of sounds, which is not a part of actual speech and less lengthy answers or explanations where they are not required..

Gestures communicate. Hand signals can communicate silently. Touching communicates, it can be friendly or it can be aggressive.

Tips for good counselling

- Be relaxed and attentive. Always lean forward while talking to the patients that shows our interest towards them.
- Keep your facial expressions relaxed and friendly.
- When standing, maintain a balance to our stance.
- Move purposefully; it shows confidence.
- Use your hands above the waist. Use both hands and make large gestures.



Patients clarifies doubt from the counsellor

- Keeping the palms up is a positive gesture.
- Smile when appropriate; look pleasant and genuine, this shows the warmth and openness of the counsellor
- Always turn the face towards the patient nodding head vertically

Avoid . . .

- Gestures like crossing the legs, swinging foot and tapping fingers reveals that the counsellor is impatient and not interested.

- Avoid shifting eyes and head quickly during conversation when the patient asks a question.
 - Avoid hair twirling, this shows that the counsellor is incompetent and uncertain.
 - Don't place the hands in front of the mouth or rub the arm or leg, this shows that the counsellor is in anxiety.
 - Avoid talking too loud or too low
 - When talking to the patient do not look down or frown the face, this shows that the counsellor is defensive and untrustworthy.
 - Avoid cleaning glasses, biting nails, rubbing eyes and noses.
 - Do not look down or to the side. Look directly at the person with a sense of confidence but not overbearing or threatening in nature
- In summary, our face, eyes, hands (gestures), and posture express what is going on inside our mind. They give clues to others as to whether the words we say are consistent with what we are really feeling. Awareness of our body language can allow us to send a consistent message. Smiling, making eye contact, using open gestures, and using good posture can bring up our level of self-confidence. Thus it is very important for a counsellor to improve their body language.
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