

SOME “DO’S” AND “DON’TS” OF COMMUNICATING WITH VICTIMS*

DO:

- Attempt foremost to communicate trust, support and confidence.
- Calm and comfort victims. Ask “How are you doing?”
- Allow victims time to tell what happened and describe how they are feeling in their own words.
- Give victims back the control the offender took away by letting them decide when and where to talk.
- Reassure them that their feelings are quite normal and natural, even though they may seem a bit unusual at the moment.
- Let the victim know that any feelings of anger, distress, frustration, fear, etc. are *not* uncommon and are perfectly justifiable.
- Be willing to *listen* to the victim share his or her experience if he or she wants to talk about the crime and its effects, and *validate* that experience with empathy and support.
 - Be alert for hidden meanings and messages not directly expressed by the victim, without making unwarranted assumptions.
 - Be encouraging, but not unrealistic.
 - Be alert for opportunities to stress the victim’s qualities and strengths (without being patronizing).
 - Accept the fact that you may never know whether a victim follows through with your recommendations.
 - Have a information and referral system – with names, addresses, telephone numbers, e-mails, and web sites/pages – to determine appropriate referrals.
 - Offer to make referral calls/contacts for further information and victim support (to ensure that a connection is actually made for the victim).
 - Ask for assistance from a supervisor if a call appears to be too difficult to handle yourself.
 - Recognize the mistakes will be made, and that increased communication skills come from learning from your mistake.
- Understand that many victims will have extreme difficulty reconstructing their lives after a violent crime, and that some may *never* recover from the tragedy.

DON’T:

- Be judgmental or blame the victim for the crime that was committed against him or her.
- "Second guess" how the victim reacted to the crime, either at the time it was occurring or in the aftermath of a violent act.
- Avoid the victim, or avoid listening about his or her reaction to the crime. Listening about and validating those experiences and emotions are critical to a victim's reconstruction after a crime.
- Try to frame the victim's experience to any possibly similar experiences, including your own. It is *essential* to individualize each victim, each crime, and each victim's reaction to that crime.
- Be "over-helpful" by making decisions and choices for victims. Since no victim *chooses* to be victimized or has control over a violent act committed against him or her, the ability for victims to *regain control* over their lives, and *make decisions* affecting their lives, becomes very important.
 - Be discouraged if you feel a call has been unsuccessful. You are not expected to "solve" most problems with a single phone call.
 - Be afraid of silence. Use it constructively. Don't talk more than the victim caller.
 - Become flustered by the victim's anxiety or urgency. One of the most important things is that you must remain calm, even in a crisis. Remember too that your anxiety can easily be transmitted over the telephone.
 - "Take sides" with a victim who has had difficult experiences with the criminal or juvenile justice system. Work to solve problems, and assure the victim that you will do your best to address their identified needs. Avoid "trash talk" about allied professionals at all costs!
 - Become defensive or arrogant, or get into an argument with a victim.
 - Expect to be a psychotherapist, nor to know all the "right" answers. Your job is to listen and assist the victim – to the degree possible – in handling his or her immediate issues.

SOURCES:

Kaufman-Yavitz, Louise. (N.D.). "Some Common Do's and Don't's." St. Louis, MO

Seymour, Anne. (1998). "Do's and Don't's in Supporting Victims of Crime. Unpublished.

Stout, Ed. (N.D.). "Victim First Aid." St. Louis, MO: Aid for Victims of Crime.

GOOD THINGS TO SAY TO VICTIMS

- ✓ How can I help you?
- ✓ What can I do for you?
- ✓ I'm sorry.
- ✓ What happened is not your fault.
- ✓ I believe you.
- ✓ Your case is important/unique.
- ✓ Are you safe?
- ✓ Do you have any concerns about your safety?
- ✓ Who else have you spoken to?
- ✓ Would you like a referral for further victim assistance?
- ✓ Can I make any calls for you?
- ✓ Do you need anything else?
- ✓ If you do, contact me at....
- ✓ I'm sorry to bother you.
- ✓ I know this is one more interruption in your life.
- ✓ If you have a serious problem or crisis, dial 911.
- ✓ You are not going crazy.
- ✓ I can't imagine, but...
- ✓ I can't possibly understand what you are going through, but I'm going to try and help you.
- ✓ I don't know, but I'll find out.
- ✓ How are you doing?
- ✓ Let's see if we can figure out your most important needs right now.
- ✓ I'm glad you called.

BAD THINGS TO SAY TO VICTIMS

- ✓ I know how you feel.
- ✓ I understand what you' re going through.
- ✓ Why???
- ✓ Why were you....didn't you...?
- ✓ Your case reminds me of another victim I dealt with...
- ✓ As a general rule of thumb...
- ✓ It's God's will (or any religious platitude).
- ✓ Move on, put it behind you.
- ✓ You need to get over it/ get on with your life.
- ✓ I can promise you that will happen for sure.
- ✓ If I were in your shoes....
- ✓ You're so strong...
- ✓ You're so lucky...
- ✓ At least you weren't hurt.
- ✓ You should forgive.
- ✓ Time heals all wounds.
- ✓ Why didn't you.....?
- ✓ It could be worse.
- ✓ What you need is.....
- ✓ Drunk driving "accident."
- ✓ Get over it. Get on with your life.
- ✓ You're not the only victim I'm trying to help.
- ✓ Offenders aren't really bad people...
- ✓ The poor defendant had a really tough childhood....
- ✓ Nothing at all.
- ✓ Avoid using generalizations.
- ✓ Avoid comparisons with other victims or cases.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION ON THE TELEPHONE

“No mortal can keep a secret. If the lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of every pore.”

– Sigmund Freud

Nonverbal messages play an important role in our business and personal lives. Consequences of ignorance about nonverbal communication can be costly. Nonverbal messages can have a strong influence on the message we communicate to others.

Interpreting Vocal Messages

Vocal factors include the way we use our voice, apart from the words themselves – pitch, tone, volume, etc. Much information is transmitted through vocal patterns.

Vocal factors are an essential part of the communicated message. Factors such as pitch, tone, rhythm, and inflection convey different emotions. For example, when you “raise your voice,” the message is one of increased emotion such as anger or frustration. High volume with irregular inflection can convey cheerfulness.

- *Pitch.* How high or low your voice is can reveal much about your personality style and emotions.
- *Tone.* Listeners can read into the tone of your voice, and can determine frustration, anger, boredom, and other emotions.
- *Rhythm.* To be most effective, rhythm should be steady. A varied rhythm can be hard to follow.
- *Inflection.* A friendly voice ends statements with a lilt in the voice.
- *Clarity.* A clear and steady speaking voice is best for gathering and conveying information. Slow down, speak deliberately, and you will be understood.
- *Timing/Pace.* The timing and pace of communication can also give you verbal clues. A “pregnant pause” may set the listener up for an important announcement. A drawn out reply may indicate indifference, and a quick, short reply may indicate impatience.

Effective Listening

No matter how effective your questions are, if you aren't listening, you won't get the information. Listening is a mental process. There is a very real difference between hearing and listening.

We can hear things going on all around us that do not register with the brain in the sense of provoking thought. This type of hearing usually "goes in one ear and out the other."

Listening – active listening – assumes an understanding or comprehension that hearing does not. This type of listening weighs and considers what is being said.

Active Listening Techniques

Selective Listening

Selective listening is the skill of focusing on the words that reveal your client's need and problems. Selective listening highlights your client's objectives. The thing that distinguishes selective listeners is their ability to go beyond the spoken words and "hear" the underlying motivation.

- Give your clients your complete attention. Let other telephone calls be answered by colleagues. Don't try to complete peripheral work while talking with a client. Don't allow yourself to be distracted by activity around your desk.

Responsive Listening

Responsive listening is sometimes called "reactive" listening. That is because you react to points your client makes, and you verbally or non-verbally support them. As you talk, you endorse or reinforce your client's assertions, and you ask additional questions to clarify what you've heard.

- *Verbal feedback.* Responsive listening also involves providing feedback, which demonstrates to your client that you are paying attention and appreciating the importance of what s/he is telling you. Sometimes merely saying, "I see," or even, "Uh-huh" as your client answers your questions can build rapport, demonstrate your interest and attention, and encourage the client to keep talking.
- *Take notes.* You cannot expect to remember everything a client tells you. Some information, however, is essential. Taking notes demonstrates your professionalism and concern, as well as preserves important information.
- *Verify thoughts and feelings.* Empathetic listening means putting yourself in your client's shoes – to the degree possible – and verifying what you have heard. One basic technique is summarizing what the client says to you:
"If I understand you correctly, you'd like to complete the written victim impact statement and testify at the sentencing hearing."

Another way to listen empathetically is to demonstrate that you are trying to understand – to the

degree possible – what your client is feeling.

“If I were in your shoes, I might have concerns about that also.”

- *Confirm what you hear.* Have you heard correctly? Do you really understand what your client has told you? You can ensure that you do by simply repeating back to the client, in your own words, your understanding of his or her position.

“From what you’ve said so far, I understand that you’re asking for specific information about when you’ll get your restitution paid.”

Don’t parrot your customer’s words – paraphrase them. Test your own comprehension through restatement. If you get a point or two wrong, that is all right. You avoid misunderstanding down the line, when it could lead to client disappointment or irritation, and to a loss of confidence in you.

“Let me see if I hear what you’re saying. You need to know if you have any rights if your offender violates his conditions of probation.”

Transition

Before a professional decides on which course to take, he or she confirms the information. Doctors ask, “Where does it hurt?” Lawyers ask, “Do you have that in writing?” You, too, must confirm your client’s statements and go on to build a relationship.

“Has anyone given you written information about your rights as a victim, and about services available to assist you?”

“Do you have receipts for any of your things that were stolen? It’s helpful in order to fully document your losses for the pre-sentence investigation.”

TELEPHONE SKILLS CHECK LIST

- ✓ Used proper greeting to client (asking how he or she would like to be addressed).
- ✓ Maintained friendly, calm tone of voice.
- ✓ Listened without interrupting or assuming.
- ✓ Checked for understanding of the client's key concerns or problems.
- ✓ Asked questions for clarification.
- ✓ Provided as much detail as the client required.
- ✓ Verified the client's identification.
- ✓ Avoided technical jargon.
- ✓ Matched client's communication skills.
- ✓ Offered alternative solutions.
- ✓ Demonstrated a good working knowledge of victims' rights and services within your agency, and in allied professional agencies.
- ✓ Closed conversation by asking if anything further could be done.
- ✓ Initiated follow-up documentation, and offered to make additional contacts for further information and victim assistance.
- ✓ Thanked the client for calling.
- ✓ Emphasized the importance and value of the client's involvement in the justice process.

Adapted from "Telephone Skills" found at www.changedynamics.com, January 2001.

TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS: RESPONDING TO DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

VICTIM CALLER	LISTENER/RESPONDER
Can you help me?	I'd like to try. Can you tell me more about your situation, and we'll see what we can do.
Tell me more about what that means.	Perhaps it will become clearer as we discuss the reasons why you called.
What should I do about my problem?	What do you feel is possible for you to do at this time?
I want you to help me make a decision. That's why I called.	I'd like to be helpful to you. Which of the things we've discussed do you feel most comfortable in carrying out?
Everyone so far has treated me like a dog.	I'm so sorry you feel you've been treated badly. I'm going to try my best to help you in a respectful way.
I hope you have a couple of hours to talk to me!	I wish I did! Right now I have (amount of time). Let's try and identify your major needs and concerns, and see if we can address them with this time. Otherwise, we can reschedule when we both have more time.
That (allied professional) is an idiot!	I'm sorry you had such a bad experience. Let's talk about what happened and see if I can help you solve your problem.
Can you guarantee (this) will happen?	I'm sorry, I can't guarantee anything. However, I can work closely with you to see if we can help make it happen.
Do I have to tell you who I am?	Only if you decide to do so.
You seem so factual and objective. Do you really care what happens to me?	Yes, I do.
How can you care about a stranger – someone you've never met?	If you share your personal concerns with me, I don't feel you are a stranger.
You don't care!	Why do you feel that way? Perhaps if we talk more about the reason you've called, you'll be better able to judge.

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ACTIVE LISTENING TECHNIQUES

STATEMENT	PURPOSE	TO ACHIEVE PURPOSE	EXAMPLES
ENCOURAGING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To convey interest. • To keep the person talking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't agree or disagree. • Use noncommittal words with a positive tone of voice. 	<p>"I see...."</p> <p>"Uh-huh..."</p> <p>"That's interesting..."</p>
RESTATING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To show that you are listening and understand. • To let the person know you grasp the facts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restate the other's basic ideas, emphasizing the facts. 	<p>"If I understand, your idea is...."</p> <p>"In other words, this is your decision....."</p>
REFLECTING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To show that you are listening and understand. • To let others know you are trying to understand their perspective and, to the degree possible, feelings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restate the other's basic feelings as you understand them. 	<p>"You seem to feel that...."</p> <p>"You were pretty disturbed by..."</p>
SUMMARIZING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To pull important ideas, facts, etc. together. • To establish a basis for further discussion. • To review progress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restate, reflect, and summarize major ideas and feelings. 	<p>"These seem to be the key issues you are concerned about..."</p> <p>"If I understand correctly, you feel this way about it...."</p>

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILD VICTIMS

- Keep in mind how you would want your own children to be treated under similar circumstances.
- Get to know the child. Take time to build rapport.
- Allow the child a chance to relax with you and the environment.
- Introduce yourself and explain your role in understandable language. Find out why the child thinks he or she is there, and try to clarify misunderstandings of the process.
- Adjust the way you approach children, if necessary. Examine your office or interview setting from the perspective of a child, including getting down on your knees and looking around.
- Develop patience and examine your expectations. Small children have short attention spans; do you expect them not to fidget? Would you feel comfortable telling a stranger about intimate details of your most humiliating sexual experiences?
- Recognize that children are at different levels of intellectual, behavioral and language development. Make sure you have a basic understanding of what is normal for different ages, and of limitations.
- Use age-appropriate language. Avoid big words and complicated sentences. Keep events in sequence. Find out what words the child uses and use them.
- Let children know it is okay to tell you when they don't understand what you are saying or asking.

CHANGES TO EXPECT IN A GRIEVING PERSON

Webster defines grief as "intense emotional suffering caused by loss or deep sorrow." Grief may be also defined as the process by releasing the person who has died, a time during which good-byes are said, and learning to live alone begins. The length of time spent in recovery will vary.

PHASE ONE

Shock
Numbness

PHASE TWO

Emotional
release/outburst
Depression
Loneliness
Inability to be
logical
Panic
Denial
Symptoms of
physical illness
Anger
Guilt
Crazy feelings
Bizarre behavior
Normal
relationships
difficult

PHASE THREE

Gradual recovery
Feeling physically
better
Low periods less
often
Adjustment
Remembering more
realistically
Experimenting with
new activities
Creativity in
living
Commitment to
others

From Beth Sheller, R.N., M.S.N. Clinical Nurse Specialist in Nashville