

Communicating with Clients (Home Health Aide In-Service Training)

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Introduction

In this module... you will learn about:

- The importance of effective communication.
- Types of communication.
- The barriers to communication.
- Courtesy in use of a language other than English.

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Definitions

- **Aphasia:** Loss of the ability to use language effectively.
- **Body Language:** Communicating through posture or facial expression or actions.
- **Communicate:** To exchange information or opinions.

The Importance of Effective Communication

Before you can gather information from a client, or provide care, or make observations, you must be able to communicate effectively with your clients. You have to learn what they are thinking and feeling and you have to tell them what you are going to be doing.

Communication occurs whenever two or more people are together. Even if no one speaks, information is communicated through actions, body language, posture, facial expression, or even lack of action. We are always communicating.

Speaking and Listening

When you talk, meaning is conveyed not only by the words you choose, but also by how you say them. Your attitude and what you feel affect how and what you say. People can often "hear" your attitude even if you don't think you are revealing it. Talking is only part of verbal communicating — listening is also an important part. Too often we become so involved in talking that we forget to listen. Listening carefully will help you learn things about the clients, and it will also tell the clients that you care and are interested in them.

Good communication practices also include telling the client what you are going to do before you do it. A simple explanation can decrease fear and suspicion in a client and increase trust and cooperation.

The home health aide should speak in a pleasant voice that is neither too loud nor too soft. Speaking slowly and

clearly will help the client understand what you are saying. The use of slang or vulgar words or phrases by the home health aide is never appropriate.

The home health aide should always assume that the client can hear and understand what is being said. Even if the client appears to be confused or unconscious, you should never speak as though the client cannot understand. Hearing is the last of the five senses to leave the body and is present even in a deep comatose state. You have no way of knowing what is heard or understood at this time.

Families

When you are visiting a client at his or her home, you will probably meet members of the client's family. You should encourage communication among family members. Communication alone can sometimes help solve psychological problems that have been simmering in families for a long time.

There is also a lot you can learn by communicating with family members, and by observing the patterns of communication between family members.

Is there a great deal of anger expressed in the household? Do family members appear to be under stress when they are together, but calmer when you speak to them separately? Do they ignore each other? Do children act cold and rebellious? Are they making unreasonable demands on each other? Are there any changes from the family communication patterns you've noticed in the past.

As a home health aide, you should stay alert to the patterns of communication you observe. Discuss them with your supervisor. They may indicate psychological issues that need to be addressed. You will learn more about family dynamics in Chapter 44.

Written Communication

You will communicate every day with your supervisor and with other health care workers by what you write down on your agency's documentation forms. It is important that you keep this communication accurate and legible and complete. If you forget to record a procedure or observation, or if you record it in a way that others cannot understand, you may be risking harm to a client.

You may even have to communicate in writing with a client. A client who has trouble speaking may pass you a note, or a client who cannot hear may ask you to write what you are going to do. It is important that you practice your writing skills so your written communications will not be misunderstood.

Nonverbal Communication

Body Language

Your posture, facial expressions, and actions often reveal your true attitudes and feelings better than your words do. This is called body language. Moving slowly and having a slumped posture tells people that you are tired or bored. Clenched teeth, a frown, and a rigid posture could tell people you are angry. These are not the messages a home health aide wants to give to the clients. Moving briskly, standing erect, and smiling reassures the clients that you are skilled, alert, and interested.

It is important that your body language agrees with what you are saying. Telling a client not to hurry while you are tapping your foot, or hurrying yourself, is sending two different messages. The client will get the message that you are impatient. Remember, actions often speak louder than words.

Eye Contact

Maintaining eye contact is also important. This shows your clients that they have your complete attention. Some cultures avoid eye contact or find it threatening and offensive. Discuss this with your supervisor if you sense any

discomfort in making eye contact with a client.

Touch

A good way to communicate feelings is often through touch. Holding a hand, touching an arm or shoulder conveys tenderness, caring, concern, and warmth. We all have a need to be touched by another human being. Many older people are touched only when it is necessary to carry out a function such as bathing or positioning, yet the need for a warm, caring touch does not disappear with age.

Barriers to Communication

The Hearing Impaired Client

It is important to know the degree of hearing loss for all your clients. Determine on which side the client hears better and always speak to that side. Since older clients often lose the capacity to hear the higher-pitched sounds, it is best to keep your voice lower so it will be easier to hear you. Speaking in a clear, moderate voice is preferable to yelling. It will also help to stand in front of the client so he or she can see you.

If the client cannot hear at all, you may have to use written messages in order to communicate. Carrying a small tablet and pen in your pocket may be helpful.

The Blind Client

Your words and tone of voice will be even more important when you are communicating with a blind or near-blind client. Blind people often become very sensitive to tone of voice.

The Difficult Client

Being ill and dependent is very stressful, and a client may be very demanding and irritable. This behavior is often directed at you simply because you are the only one there. It is important for you to remember this and not take negative comments and behavior personally.

Often the client will be more cooperative and pleasant after he or she has had the opportunity to let the anger and frustration out. Reacting to the anger with disapproval, scolding, or your own anger will only make the problem worse.

It is important for the home health aide to listen to what the client has to say and then respond appropriately without becoming defensive. Complaints should be taken seriously and checked out to see if they are valid.

The Confused Client

Some clients have trouble understanding language. Aphasia, for example, is a condition that makes it difficult for the impaired client to understand even simple speech. Speak as slowly and simply as you can. Use non-verbal cues, such as displaying the food you are bringing. Gently guide the client's actions, but do not let yourself become frustrated and do not use force.

Other Languages

Some clients may have grown up speaking a language other than English. They may never have learned English well, or they may have forgotten a lot of it. Try to speak simply and slowly. Using single words will help. Use nonverbal cues. You might even learn a few words or a few phrases of the client's language to help make yourself understood. If there is someone else in the home (or at your agency) who speaks the second language, you might ask for assistance translating what the client is saying. Be patient. Imagine what it would be like to be in an unfamiliar place where most of the people don't speak your language.

Courtesy When You Speak Other Languages

You may sometimes be in a situation in which you and another person present in the client's home speak a language that the client does not speak. This may be another health care worker or a friend or a family member.

For example, the client might speak only English, but you might be fluent in Spanish and the client's grandmother is also fluent in Spanish. If you are in this position, you must remember that not understanding what people say can be very frightening.

Imagine that you are ill and the people caring for you whisper to each other in a language you don't understand. You are going to think they are gossiping about you even if they are only talking about the weather. Or you are going to think that they are saying something serious about your medical condition that they don't want you to hear. It can be very frightening or upsetting.

When clients can hear you, it is only common courtesy to speak in a language that they can understand. If you must convey information to someone in a language that the client does not speak, you should go to another place where you are certain the client cannot overhear you.

Communication Helps Everyone

As a home health aide, you may be interacting with a client more than anyone else in that client's life. You and the clients will be communicating for most of your care visit. Good communication techniques help to make your job easier and your clients' lives more enjoyable.