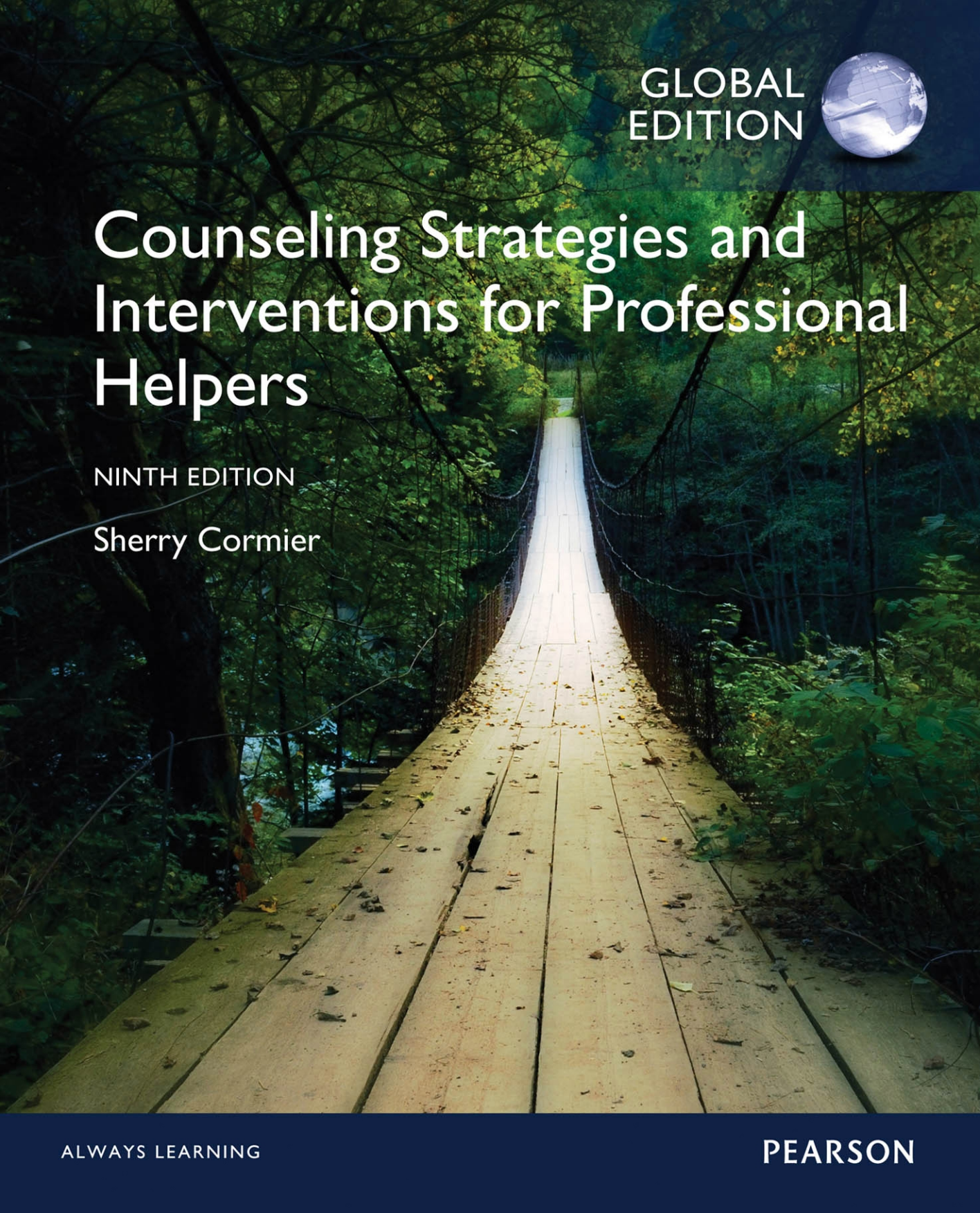
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Counseling Strategies and Interventions for Professional Helpers

Global Edition
Ninth Edition

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1. Clients respond better and more positively, verbalize at greater length, and indicate a stronger willingness to return to see helpers who are attentive.
2. Experienced and seasoned helpers typically do better with attending skills, while inexperienced or beginning helpers have room to grow on dimensions of attentiveness.

In the following section, we describe the primary dimensions of helper attentiveness.

COMMUNICATION OF ATTENTIVENESS

Attentiveness is communicated primarily through four dimensions: facial expressions, eye contact, body positions and movement, and verbal responses (Cormier, Nurius, & Osborn, 2013). You may have noted that the first three of these channels are all nonverbal. On the surface, attending to clients appears relatively simple; however, it is easier said than done. Egan (2014) listed a number of obstacles to the attending process:

1. Being judgmental
2. Having biases
3. Pigeonholing clients
4. Attending to facts
5. Sympathizing
6. Interrupting

These are all ways in which we disrupt our attentiveness to and with clients.

Another issue in the communication of attentiveness involves the various meanings that people attach to different gestures or words because such meanings have been learned. Some of the meanings are fairly standardized; others have distinct regional or cultural variances. For example, do you prefer to have people look at you when you talk to them? Most European Americans do, but some American Indians do not, and studies suggest that some inner-city African-American youths do not. It is important to remember that some cultural groups have sanctions on direct visual contact during some types of interpersonal interactions. When you are telling someone what you think, what would be your reaction if that person began to frown? If the frown was not consistent with your feelings, you probably would begin to question the inconsistency between your message and the listener's response. If you feel strongly about a topic and the other person does not seem to care about it, are you likely to continue telling the person about your feelings? No—because most of us want to know that our feelings are heard and understood.

For these and other reasons, your behavior can contribute to your client's feelings of security. The increased sense of security that occurs as clients are talking about themselves can become a self-reinforcing phenomenon. Most of you have probably had the experience of entering a new activity and feeling nervous and unsure of yourselves. But as you stayed with the activity and nothing bad (perhaps even some good things) happened, your self-confidence began to grow. So it is with the helping process. As the client begins to experience your acceptance, your understanding, and your commitment, the feelings of vulnerability, uncertainty, caution, or lack of trust begin to dissipate. In the following sections of the chapter, we describe nonverbal and verbal ways to increase your attentiveness with clients. We also explore the contextual variables surrounding

these dimensions because, as we indicated earlier, the meanings of certain gestures or words are learned and vary by region and culture.

Facial Expressions

Knapp, Hall, and Horgan (2014) observe that the face is the primary means by which people communicate information about their emotional states. Facial expressions convey basic emotions such as anger, disgust, fear, sadness, and happiness. Unlike most other aspects of nonverbal attending behavior, facial expressions do not seem to vary much among cultures. These basic emotions seem to be represented by the same facial expressions across cultures, although individual cultural norms may influence how much and how often such emotions are expressed (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). For example, anger is often conveyed cross-culturally through the eyes and by changes in the area of the mouth and jaw. However, men and women both within and between cultures may express anger in different ways and at different times. For example, some persons may reject the idea of releasing anger because they have learned it is "unchristian" or "unladylike" (Kelley, 1979, p. 24). Your facial expressions communicate messages to the client that are as meaningful as those you receive from the client's facial expressions.

A primary—although often not intentional—way that helpers use their facial expressions is to reinforce client behavior. For example, Almedar, your client, reveals that he was invited to join an honorary society at his school. Because Almedar's prior success at school has been limited, in hearing this, your own face lights up. This in and of itself encourages Almedar to share more of this part of his story with you. Another aspect of facial expressions and attentiveness has to do with *mirroring*. It is important for your facial expressions to reflect those of the client: If the client expresses pleasure, you look happy; if the client conveys sadness, you show concern. The same mirror neurons in the brain that we discussed in Chapter 2 that help to create resonant empathy are also related to the mirroring of facial expressions between helpers and clients.

ANIMATION. Animation in facial expression gives clients the feeling that you are alert and responding to ongoing communication. An absence of facial expressions (a deadpan look) suggests a lack of interest, awareness, or presence to clients. You can surely remember talking with someone who lacks facial responsiveness and the effect this had on you, and we doubt it was pleasant. The most noticeable expression is the smile. The appropriate use of smiles can have a powerful effect on clients, particularly when used in conjunction with occasional head nods. However, continuous smiling has a negative effect, just as do frequent frowns, which can communicate disapproval. On the other hand, occasional frowns communicate your failure to follow or understand a particular point and are therefore often useful.

Eye Contact

What is the effect of eye contact in the helper-client relationship? Research into interpersonal interaction indicates that eye contact has more than one effect and that these effects do vary across cultures. It may signal a need for affiliation, involvement, or inclusion; it may reflect the quality of an existing relationship; or it may enhance the communication of a complex message. Eye contact can also produce anxiety in the other

person. A gaze lasting longer than about 10 seconds can signal aggressiveness rather than acceptance. An averted gaze may hide shame over expressing something seen as culturally taboo.

In some cultures, client eye contact is appropriate when listening. In other cultures, an individual may look away as a sign of respect or may demonstrate more eye contact when talking and less eye contact while listening. Effective eye contact—eye contact that reinforces clients and makes their communication easier—lies somewhere between the fixed gaze and "shifty eyes," or frequent breaks of eye contact. Look at clients when they are talking. Occasionally, permit your eyes to drift to an object away—*but not far away*—from the client. Then return your eyes to the client. Let yourself be natural. At the same time, avoid making stereotypical judgments about the client's eye contact or lack thereof. As Knapp, Hall, and Horgan (2014) comment, the meanings and effects of eye contact vary both within and across cultural groups. For some clients, less eye contact is typical of their culture and should not be construed to mean anything else. In other words, eye contact varies from client to client and within and between cultural groups, and eye contact patterns may involve changes in duration as well as frequency (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). Some clients may favor more direct eye contact because their cultural identifications emphasize visual contact during interactions, while other clients identify with cultures that sanction a lot of eye contact during some kinds of interpersonal interactions. Other clients may avoid eye contact because of their clinical disorder. For example, some clients with autism, depression, or social anxiety may not be able to bear the intensity of a gaze between themselves and the helper. Another variable that affects eye contact during the helping process is distance or space between the helper and client. As physical space is increased, eye contact often increases too; as physical space is decreased, eye contact also often decreases. We provide several application exercises for you to work with these nonverbal attending skills.

APPLICATION EXERCISE 4.1

Facial Expressions

A. Facial Attentiveness

With a partner, designate one of you as the speaker and the other as the listener. While the speaker shares one of his or her concerns, the listener's tasks are the following:

1. Do not respond with any facial expression or animation whatsoever while the speaker is talking; maintain complete facial passivity.
2. After two or three minutes, respond with a facial reaction that is opposite to the feelings and concerns being expressed by the speaker. For example, if the speaker is talking seriously, smile and look happy.
3. After another three minutes or so, respond with facial animation and expression that mirror the kind and intensity of feelings being expressed by the speaker.

Discuss the different results produced by these three approaches. Reverse roles and repeat the exercise. What can you conclude about facial attentiveness as a result of this exercise? What have you learned about yourself and your facial gestures? What do you want to change about your facial gestures, and how do you intend to bring about this change? If possible, repeat this activity with a person from a distinctly different culture than your own. Do your conclusions change in any way?

B. Recognizing Facial Cues

Find two people with whom to work. Designate one of you as the speaker for round 1, the second as the listener, and the third as the observer. Roles are rotated for rounds 2 and 3. For each round, the listener feeds each of the four incomplete sentences to the speaker. The speaker repeats the sentence and adds the first completion that comes to his or her mind. The observer watches for changes and cues in the speaker's facial expressions as he or she works with all the incomplete sentences in the round. For this to be most effective, when you are in the role of the speaker, take your time, breathe deeply, and say whatever comes into your mind without thinking about it or censoring it. The observer shares the observations with the speaker after the round is over. When you are in the role of the speaker, only disclose what feels comfortable to you.

1. Anger
   - **a.** When I get angry . . .
   - **b.** I get angry when . . .
   - **c.** I feel disgusted that . . .
   - **d.** One thing that makes me mad is . . .
2. Sadness
   - **a.** When I get sad . . .
   - **b.** I get sad when . . .
   - **c.** I feel "blue" that . . .
   - **d.** One thing that makes me sad is . . .
3. Fear
   - **a.** When I get afraid . . .
   - **b.** I feel afraid that . . .
   - **c.** I get afraid when . . .
   - **d.** One thing that makes me afraid is . . .

APPLICATION EXERCISE 4.2

Eye Contact

Perhaps you can better grasp the effects of eye contact by participating in the following dyadic exercise. With a partner, determine who will be the speaker and who will be the listener. While the speaker speaks, the listener should listen but avoid eye contact with the speaker. Then discuss the following questions: What are the effects on the speaker? How well did the speaker feel that he or she was able to communicate? Try the exercise again, but this time, maintain eye contact with the speaker as described in the previous section. What effect does this have? Reverse roles, and repeat the exercise. Discuss how the effects may vary depending on the gender and culture of the participants.

Body Positions and Use of Space

Body positions serve important functions in a helping session. Body positions and movement are involved in regulating the space or distance between the helper and a client, greeting a client, terminating a session, and taking turns (that is, the exchange of speaker and listener roles within a conversation; Cormier, Nurius, & Osborn, 2013). Body movement and comfort with physical space (closeness or distance) vary among cultures and with gender. Generally, among European Americans, counselors and clients sit face-to-face. Even an intervening object such as a desk is often considered a distraction—a

barrier to attentiveness. Ivey, D'Andrea, and Ivey (2012, p. 147) note that, in some Eskimo and Inuit cultural groups, persons sit side by side when discussing a personal issue. European Americans usually prefer several feet of distance between chairs; however, those from contact cultures may be more comfortable with closer distances (Watson, 1970). Many Latino and Latina clients prefer closer distances, as do client and helper dyads of the same race (Knapp et al., 2014). Yet individual differences among clients may be as important in use of space and distance as cultural patterns. For example, the effects of space also vary with a client's expression of feelings. A client who has just expressed a lot of anger often requires more personal space than someone who is feeling sad or experiencing a lot of pain. In short, the concept of space has no universals.

Gender also dictates what is considered appropriate space. Some females may be more comfortable with a closer distance to the helper, especially if the helper is female. However, many female clients may feel intruded upon if a male helper positions himself too close. Clients with a history of severe physical and/or sexual abuse may require greater space, particularly at the beginning stage of the helping process. To be respectful of all clients, it is important to allow *them* to choose the appropriate amount of distance from the helper in the counseling interactions.

One important aspect of body communication involves the amount of tension conveyed by the body. Astute helpers note the degree of tension or relaxation in a client's body. A body that is blocking or holding back a feeling may be tense, with shallow, fast breathing. A relaxed body posture indicates comfort, both with the counseling setting and with the topic being discussed. Selective body tension communicates action. It may reflect a "working" moment for you—involvement with the client, movement toward a goal, or preparation for something new.

Shifts in body position, such as leaning forward or backward, often signify an "important segment of the encounter" (Knapp et al., 2014, p. 139). Body tension that is continuous probably communicates discomfort with the client, the topic, or yourself. To be comfortable with yourself, it is important to begin from a base of relaxation because this is what will be mirrored to the client. Application Exercise 4.3 may help you achieve a desired state of relaxation.

APPLICATION EXERCISE 4.3

Muscle Relaxation

While sitting down, raise your hands and arms three to four inches above the armrests of the chair and then let them drop. Feel the tension flow out of your arms. Repeat this, and try to increase the relaxation. Let your back and buttocks be in contact with as much of the chair as possible. Feel the chair pressing against your body. Tense the muscles in your legs and then release the tension. Feel the surge of warmth in your muscles as your legs relax. Repeat this tensing and releasing of leg muscles several times, each time achieving a little more relaxation. Now take three or four deep breaths slowly. After each breath, slowly release the air from your lungs. Do you feel more relaxed than when you started?

Do this exercise again—this time without any interruptions between different body exercises. This is a good exercise to do just before seeing a client. It is one of the ways by which you can prepare yourself for the session. As you do the exercise more often, you will find it easier and quicker to achieve a surprisingly comfortable state of relaxation.

Visible Behavior

Together, facial expressions, eye contact, and body messages constitute the helper's visible behavior. The impact of visible behavior on communication is considerable, as Application Exercise 4.4 illustrates.

APPLICATION EXERCISE 4.4

The Impact of Visible Behavior

This exercise gives you an opportunity to measure the effect of your facial and body gestures on the person receiving your message. Select as your partner a person you have wanted to involve in a conversation. Sit down facing each other. Both of you close your eyes—and keep them closed throughout the conversation. Talk to each other for about five minutes. Then open your eyes, complete the conversation, and discuss the differences between visual and nonvisual communication. What compensations did you have to make while talking without sight? How successful do you believe you were in your communication attempts? What, in particular, were you missing in terms of visual feedback from your partner?

VERBAL FOLLOWING BEHAVIOR AND SELECTIVE ATTENTION

The things you say will have an immediate impact on your clients. Many studies have shown that the helper's responses can mold and shape the direction of the client's responses. In other words, whatever topic you respond to with a verbal acknowledgment, the client will probably continue to talk about it. Topics that you do not respond to often get cut off or interrupted. This process is called *selective attention*. Egan (2014) has aptly noted that if helpers think everything that their clients say is key, then nothing is key. One of the implications of this is that, as helpers, we are constantly sorting out all the various messages and story lines we get from clients. What is important? What is more relevant? Less relevant? Are there patterns of messages or story lines we do not want to respond to with attentiveness, such as with the client who is always talking about how everyone else is the problem?

Ivey, Gluckstern Packard, and Ivey (2006) have suggested that what the helper chooses to focus on says more about the helper than the client. These authors also stated that it is important to notice what topics the helper selectively attends to so the clients are not inadvertently or unconsciously steered away from topics they need to discuss just because they are uncomfortable for the helper. If you become aware of this happening, it is useful to consult your supervisor (see also Chapter 10).

Several points should be considered in terms of your verbal impact. Fit your comments or questions into the context of the topic at hand. Do not interrupt clients or quickly change topics. Stay with the topics that clients introduce, and help them develop and pursue them. This implies more than a technique; it is a highly conscious awareness of what is going on between you and your client. It is called *verbal following*, and it is an important way to show your attentiveness to clients. Egan (2014) proposed some useful questions that may help you listen and attend to clients, especially with the skill of verbal following:

- What are the main ideas reflected by the client's message?
- What are the most important experiences described in the client's messages?
- What themes are apparent in the client's messages?