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**LAY COUNSELOR**  
ACADEMY

# **Home Stance: Foundational Counseling Skills**





*These 6 simple (but not always easy) communication strategies are the powerhouses of effective, respectful, and empathic mental health counseling.*

## I. Empathic Body Language and Tone of Voice:

We believe what we see in someone's body language and hear in their tone of voice more than their actual words. An "I'm sorry" with a genuine look of concern and a slight leaning in is believable. An "I'm sorry" with surly tone and arched eyebrows is received entirely different.

Empathic body language and tone of voice is easy when we are feeling open and caring of others. However, when we are tired, irritable, judgmental, fearful, or distracted it takes intention to manage our body language and tone. We know quite a bit about what types of body language and tone of voice communicate empathy (whether we are feeling it that day or not) from cross cultural research.

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- **Eye contact** is the most powerful non-verbal way to convey empathy. It is yet another reason why typing or writing during sessions is problematic!
  - **Smiling** is deeply important in communicating empathy, and has been researched extensively. It is sometimes referred to as "holding hands without touching".
  - Open **body posture** that is "squared" to the other person and leaning forward shows engagement and care.
  - **Voice Tone**, as well as pitch and pacing that conveys warmth and sincerity demonstrates empathy and goodwill.



**A note on phone sessions:** because we can't rely on body language to convey empathy in a phone call, we typically need to double-down on the empathic communication strategies, below, to ensure our empathy is received.



## 2. Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions are the gold standard of all communication. Open-ended questions show curiosity, convey respect for what others think and feel, and lower guardedness. **When questions are truly open, we don't know what we'll hear next or where things might go in the conversation, which is ideal.** Open-ended questions are an invitation for others to share what's on their mind, allowing us to see things from their point of view and more deeply understand them.

Open-ended Question Examples:

"Tell me more (about)..."

"How did you decide to...?"

"How do you feel (about)..."

"What are your thoughts (about)..."

"What helps you?"



Although “why” is also an open-ended question stem, it isn’t useful. “Why” sounds judgmental, even when we don’t mean it to be. It tends to put people on the defensive and closes the door to a fuller conversation. Just think about what happens when we ask “why did you do that?” to our kids!



*“Why did you stop taking your medications?”*

*“Why did you go back to him?”*

**Closed** questions only allow for “yes” and “no” responses. They squeeze out the other person’s freedom to speak about what they believe is important.

**Closed Questions:**

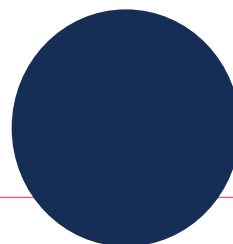
*“Did you have a good day?”*

*“Do you get along with your mom?”*

**Changed to Open:**

*“How was your day?”*

*“Tell me more about your relationship with your mom...”*



*"Are you taking your medication?"*

*"What's been your experience with your medications?"*

**Narrow** questions can only be answered one way; they limit dialogue and squash rapport. While they may obtain transactional information, they aren't very effective at conveying empathy, going deeper, or getting to fertile ground.

**Narrow Questions:**

**Changed to Open:**

*"What classes are you taking in school?"*

*"Tell me more about your classes..."*

*"Do you want to leave him now, or do you want to wait?"*

*"How are you feeling about leaving?"*

*"How many siblings do you have?"*

*Tell me about your family of origin...*



### 3. Empathic Reflection

Empathic reflection is skillfully sharing back what we have heard the other person say. This is one of the most potent ways to demonstrate that we are truly listening, that we value what they've shared. When empathic reflection is done well, it helps others self-reflect, as they listen to their own thoughts and feelings without the interference of another person's opinions. In practice, empathic reflection can take the place of a question, prompting someone to talk further without having to pose a query (research indicates a ratio of 3 empathic reflections for every one open-ended question is ideal; too many questions in a row begins to feel like an interrogation). Sharing back what another person has said (or what they are showing, in the case of feelings) is often one of the empathic communication strategies people find most challenging. Many of us didn't get much empathic reflection from caregivers, so it may not come naturally. Also, some of us have been on the other end of poorly delivered reflection, which can sound insulting or fake. Don't let this scare you off of using it! With practice, empathic reflection can be a bit of a magic wand in helping others!

Here are some different stems, and examples:

#### It sounds like...

*"...you're feeling overwhelmed by all the changes happening."*

*"...you're really proud of the progress you've made."*

#### You seem to be feeling...

*"...anxious about the upcoming surgery."*



*"...relieved now that you've talked about it."*

**I get the sense that...**

*"...you're feeling stuck and don't know where to turn."*

*"...you're really enjoying your new routine."*





**You feel \_\_\_ because \_\_\_.**

*"You feel frustrated because you haven't seen the results you were hoping for."*

*"You feel excited because you finally got some good news."*

**It seems like you...**

*"...are struggling with balancing your responsibilities."*

*"...are really passionate about this new project."*





## I'm hearing that...

*"...you're feeling a bit lost and need some direction."*

*"...you're grateful for the support you've received."*

## 4. Affirming Strengths

Looking for, recognizing, and sharing back to people their strengths, efforts, uniqueness, and all that is good about them is a powerful way we can communicate our care and empathy. Especially in health care and social service settings, which are, by nature, problem and deficit focused, a strengths perspective represents a significant paradigm shift. Focusing on strengths is much harder than it sounds! Often we've been raised, trained, and educated to follow the problem. So, it usually takes quite a bit of conscious practice to train our minds to look for what is going well, what is working, what strengths and unique abilities the person in front of us has.

Examples:

**Client:** *"I don't smoke around my kids."*

**Common response:**  
*"They still likely know you are using."* (problem focused, judgment)

**Strength-based:** *"You really care about keeping your use away from your children."*



or

**Client:** "I can't seem to stick to a diet, or exercise. It's hopeless."

**Common response:**  
"Have you tried the Paleo diet?"  
(problem focus, advice)

**Strength-based:** "Your health must be really important to you, for you to continue to try."

**Client:** "I don't know, I just can't live like this anymore."

**Common response:**  
"What are you going to do about it?"

**Strength-based:** "Gosh it sounds like you really have some clarity about this, that you can't do it anymore."

Even at home we can practice!

"I hate math!"



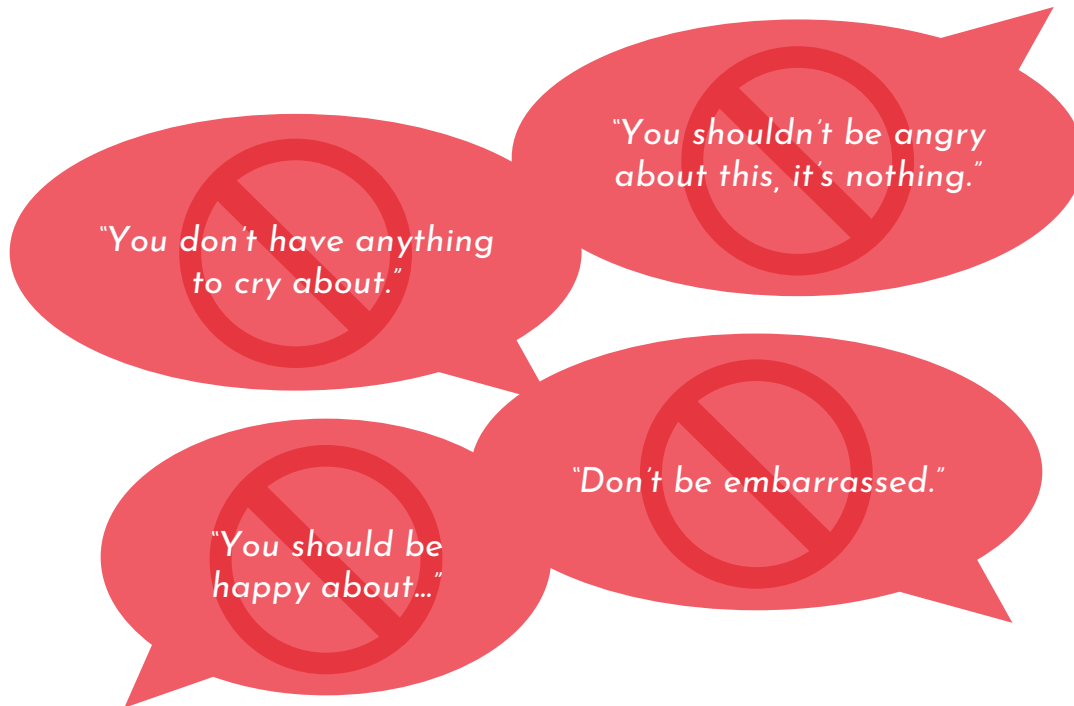
**Common response:**  
"Well, it won't help to complain, you still have to just do it."  
(problem focus, dismissing)

**Strength-based:**  
"I'm amazed that you can continue to work on it even though you can't stand it. That's real grit."



## 5. Acknowledging Feelings:

“Never meet a feeling with a fact” is a phrase we often use to talk about acknowledging feelings. Acknowledging feelings is one of the cornerstones of empathic communication. Many of us didn’t have our feeling acknowledged when we were growing up. Remember hearing comments like these?



Acknowledging another person’s feelings shows care and concern for their experiences. The mere act of acknowledging someone’s feelings by naming them (repeating back the feeling they shared) often provides relief and comfort. Having feelings acknowledged increases tolerance for a difficult feeling and lessens the intensity. This doesn’t mean that we discuss all feelings deeply, or that we need to “process” all feelings, it only means that we acknowledge feelings when clients express them..

Examples:

**Client:** *"I'm so nervous about surgery."*

**Common response:**  
*"There's no reason to be scared. The surgeon has done this procedure 100 times." (Dismissing)*



**Acknowledging:** "Sounds like you have some worries about it."

or

"You're feeling really nervous."

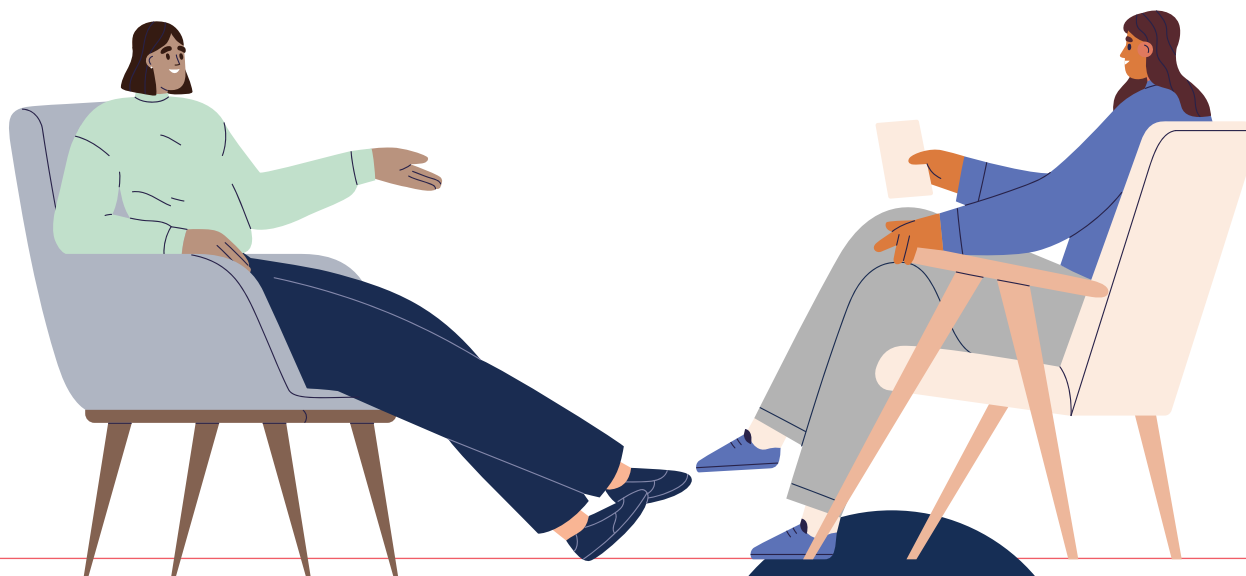
**Client:** "I just feel hopeless sometimes.  
Like what is the point?"

**Common response:**  
"You can't let yourself get  
hopeless, you have to think  
positive, think about your kids."

**Acknowledging:** "It sounds like you are feeling pretty hopeless."

or

"You are really feeling low – you're not sure what the point  
of everything is..."



## 6. Countering Shame

Shame is a painful, toxic emotion. It is when someone perceives they are broken, bad, inferior, and/or unworthy. Unlike guilt, which is associated with specific actions or behaviors, shame is more about the overall perception of self. It can profoundly impact a person's self-esteem and mental health, often leading to isolation from others, degrading self-talk, and even self-harming. If we hear shame in what someone shares, we respond in a way that helps heal the shame.



**Client:** "I know I shouldn't, but I actually started talking to my ex-boyfriend again."

**Common response:** "You know better than that..."

**Countering Shame:** "It is so tough, 'quitting' a person, it is so common, going back to talking to an ex. Tell me more." (Normalizing)

**Client:** "I've been yelling at my kids a lot lately."

**Common response:** "You can't take your stress out on them." (Judgment)

**Countering Shame:** "When we are stressed, it seems to come out on those closest to us."

**Client:** "I relapsed again last week."

**Common response:** "Again? You've got to start taking care of yourself." (Pathologizing, Advice)

**Countering Shame:** "Gosh, stopping is so tough. We all have things we struggle with. How are you feeling about it?"

