

OARS: Reflective Listening

“What people really need is a good listening to.” – Mary Lou Casey

“Good listening is fundamental to MI. The particular skill of reflective listening is one to learn first because it is so basic to all four processes of MI. It takes a fair amount of practice to become skillful in this way of listening so that reflections come more naturally and easily.”

Reflective listening can carry you a long way as a health coach. It’s the most useful skill to return to if you’re at a loss on how to proceed.

A number of things can interfere with clear communication. Language itself is imprecise and words can have multiple meanings. Individuals might not mean exactly what they say, or perhaps they don’t have the words to express what they mean. There is often a lot more beneath the surface than what a person puts into words. Thus, reflective listening requires us to *think* reflectively, wondering about the layers of meaning that potentially exist around what people actually say. An attitude of “compassionate curiosity” is helpful in this process.

Unfortunately, most of us aren’t wired to think reflectively. We are more inclined to think one step ahead—what additional information we need, how to analyze the person’s situation, or what suggestions to put forth. In doing so, we lose sight of the idea that people already are filled with substantial knowledge and insight and that our primary role is to help people see it for themselves. It helps to cultivate an unhurried and uncluttered mind in “giving people a good listening to.”

In some respects, reflective listening regards what people say as a “first draft.” By providing reflective statements, the practitioner invites a person to view the issue being explored from different angles. Often, this adds new levels of understanding, even occasional “aha!” experiences that can shift the person’s narrative about the topic of focus.

MAKING A REASONABLE GUESS

Reflective listening is essentially the skill of making a reasonable guess about what someone is communicating and reflecting it back to them in the form of a statement. This skill requires listeners to be fully present and attentive to the other person's words, actions, and body language.

By inferring what a person might be feeling, thinking, wondering, concerned about, hoping for, etc., reflective statements “have the important function of deepening understanding by clarifying whether one's guess is accurate. Reflective statements also allow people to hear again the thoughts and feelings they are expressing, perhaps in different words, and ponder them. Good reflective listening tends to keep the person talking, exploring, and considering.”

FORMING REFLECTIVE STATEMENTS

Reflections are *statements* in which the inflection usually goes slightly downward at the end. With questions, on the other hand, the inflection typically goes up at the end. Try asking aloud the question, “*You see the difference?*” Now state aloud the same words, but with the inflection easing downward at the end: “*You see the difference.*”

Learning to inflect downward takes some practice, especially if you are accustomed to asking lots of questions. An image that might be useful for making reflective statements is to picture a seabird gliding just above the surface of the water and then lightly touching down.

When first learning to use complex reflections, it can feel a bit presumptive. However, as you gain more confidence and stay within the spirit of this approach, providing reflective statements can be very rewarding in terms of helping people “talk themselves into changing.”



COMMON REFLECTION STEMS

The sentence stems below can be useful prompts to assist in forming reflective statements, particularly those that go a bit beyond what someone has said.

- It sounds like...
- You're saying that...
- You're feeling...
- It's almost as if...
- It's like...
- It feels like...
- For you, it's a matter of...
- From your point of view...
- As you see it...
- You...
- You're wondering
- You really ...
- You believe...
- Your concern is that...
- Your fear is that...
- It seems that you...
- You're not terribly excited about...
- You're not much concerned about...
- This really...
- You feel so...
- It's really important to you that...
- You're not really...
- You feel as though...
- My sense is that you're feeling...
- On the one hand you... on the other hand...
- (Others)

TWO TYPES OF REFLECTIONS

Some reflective statements simply repeat or slightly rephrase what a person has said. These *simple reflections*, used sparsely in MI, can convey basic understanding and encourage the person to say more. Simple reflections show that you're following what the person is telling you, and they also help to keep the conversation flowing.

Simple reflections, however, add little or no meaning and can hinder the conversation from moving to a deeper level. For example:

Person: *I'm feeling discouraged about how hard it is to stabilize my blood sugar.*

Sample simple reflections: *You're feeling discouraged./It's been difficult to get it under control.*

Complex reflections, used much more prominently in motivational conversations, add inferred meaning or emphasis to what someone has said. They make a reasonable guess about what's below the surface or what the person might say next. Complex reflections tend to add momentum to the exploration process. They often prompt people to consider perspectives they hadn't thought of or voiced before.

Below are five common categories of complex reflections:

- **Deeper paraphrase:** Reflect thoughts, values, attitudes, or beliefs that might lie below the surface of the client's statements
- **Amplified:** Slightly overstate (or slightly understate) what the client stated
- **Double-sided:** Reflect both sides of the person's ambivalence, issue, or dilemma
- **Feeling:** Guess at either the underlying or explicit emotion
- **Continuing the paragraph:** Move forward by speculating what the person's next sentence might be in what they've just said

USING REFLECTIONS TO GUIDE THE CONVERSATION

Reflective statements are necessarily selective, in that the health coach chooses which aspects to reflect from all that the client has said. Thus, reflections have a directional, guiding component. They are useful at various points in motivational conversations for different purposes. What you reflect as a health coach is what the client will most likely respond to and elaborate upon.

Reflective statements are commonly used selectively, or strategically, to:

- Convey empathy and understanding (seeking to understand the person's situation and words)
- Name and explore both sides of the person's ambivalence around a particular focus
- Highlight the person's "change talk"—the side of ambivalence that points towards positive change, or
- Soften "sustain talk"—the side of ambivalence favoring the status quo

If you're unsure of how to direct your reflection, it's generally wise to lead with reflections that convey empathy and understanding before becoming more directional.

STEPS FOR PROVIDING REFLECTIONS

Listening reflectively entails these basic steps:

1. Hear what the person is saying
2. Make an educated guess in your own mind about the underlying meaning
3. Choose a direction for your reflection
4. Share your guess as a concise statement

REFLECTIVE LISTENING AND THE FOUR PROCESSES:

Reflective listening is used throughout the four processes of MI (along with the other core MI interviewing skills). In the *engaging* process, reflections typically are used to engage with the person, build rapport, and convey empathy and understanding. In the *focusing* process, reflections are used to clarify the client's hopes and goals in order to identify the topic to be explored. In the *evoking* process, we use reflective statements to explore ambivalence, soften sustain talk, and cultivate change talk. During the *planning* process, reflections are used to identify and clarify change steps, strengthen confidence and commitment, and continue to reinforce change talk.