



# MI Fact Sheet Series

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING MENTAL ILLNESS

## Effective communication

### Barriers to effective communication

Communication skills allow members of a family to ask for what they want, to say 'no' when appropriate, and to express their feelings in such a way as to achieve their goals while maintaining the dignity of the other person in the interaction. These skills are also important in dealing with interpersonal conflict effectively. Certain things sometimes obstruct effective communication, including lack of skill, negative thoughts, strong emotions, indecision and the environment.

#### Lack of skill

People learn social behaviours by watching someone else do them first, practising them and refining them until they can be used to obtain good results. To be effective communicators we need to learn the skills (see below).

#### Strong emotions

Strong emotions such as anger, anxiety, frustration and guilt often interfere with using effective communication skills and can often drive ineffective interactions.

#### Indecision

Ambivalence about what we want to do interferes with our ability to be clear and assertive in interpersonal interactions.

#### Environment

Aspects of the environment within which interactions occur can interfere with effective communication. Such aspects include significant levels of stress or obvious aggression.

### Basic communication skills

Communication is a two-way process between a sender of information and a receiver of information. To be effective, communication involves the use of four skills:

1. Levelling
2. Listening
3. Validating
4. 'I...' statements

#### Levelling

Effective communication can only occur when both parties know all the relevant information (thoughts, feeling and facts). It is wrong to expect others to know what is on our minds. Misunderstanding and conflict commonly arise because one party does not know important information. Levelling means giving the other person information about your thoughts and feelings, rather than expecting her or him to read your mind. It is also important to regularly check that the other person has understood what it is you are saying. Essentially, this skill is the development of a level playing field in all interpersonal interactions.

#### Listening

This skill not only involves hearing but actively processing what others say. This requires directing our attention to what others say rather than what we are going to say next.

### Validating

This skill involves communicating to others that you have heard their position or opinion. It is not necessary to understand or agree with them, but it is important to recognise and accept their rights to feel and think as they do. It is important to accept that what others say about how they are feeling is true.

#### 'I...' statements

When you communicate how you feel to someone, are making a request, or saying 'no' to a demand, begin what you say with the expression 'I'. In this way you take responsibility for your wants and feelings rather than putting them on to the other person, which can lead to defensiveness and hostility.

#### An example of these communication techniques...

"I feel worried and frustrated when you don't take your medication because it is an important aspect in the management of your illness ('I' statement). I understand that you may have concerns about the side-effects of the medication (validation) and I am here to support you and listen if you need someone to talk to (willingness to listen)".

## Verbal and non-verbal communication

### Communication methods

Experts say that communication is composed of different methods: words, voice, tone and non-verbal clues. Of these, some are more effective in delivering a message than others. According to research, in a conversation or verbal exchange:

- Words are seven percent effective
- Tone of voice is 38 percent effective
- Non-verbal clues are 55 percent effective.

Most people fail to realise that a great deal of our communication is of a non-verbal form. Non-verbal communication includes facial expressions, eye contact, body posture and motions (eg arms crossed, standing, sitting, relaxed, tense), and positioning within groups. It may also include the way we wear our clothes or the silence we keep.

WHAT you say is not nearly as important as HOW you say it.

A dull message delivered by a charismatic person, filled with energy and enthusiasm will be accepted as brilliant. An excellent message delivered by someone who is not interested in the topic will not engage the enthusiasm of its intended audience.

In person-to-person communications our messages are sent on two levels simultaneously. If the non-verbal cues and the spoken message are incongruous, the flow of communication is hindered. Rightly or wrongly, the receiver of the communication tends to base the intentions of the sender on the non-verbal cues he or she receives.

Knowledge of non-verbal communication is important when dealing with a difficult or potentially violent situation with a family member who has a dual diagnosis.

- Picking up on the early non-verbal cues in a difficult situation will mean that you are better equipped to handle that situation
- By understanding the non-verbal communication, you will be able to respond to someone in a way that is more appropriate to their communication style
- Having knowledge of non-verbal cues may also enable you to act in such a way as to prevent a potentially violent situation from escalating any further.

If you show a true awareness to non-verbal cues, you will have a better chance of a successful interaction in a difficult or potentially violent situation.

### Static features of non-verbal communication that provide information

#### Distance

The distance one person stands from another frequently conveys a non-verbal message. In some cultures it is a sign of attraction, while in others it may reflect status or the intensity of the exchange.

#### Personal space

Personal space is your 'bubble' – the space you place between yourself and others. This invisible boundary becomes apparent only when someone bumps or tries to enter your bubble.

How you identify your personal space and use the environment in which you find yourself influences your ability to send or receive messages. How close do you stand to the one with whom you are communicating? Where do you sit in the room? All of these things affect your level of comfort, and the level of comfort of those receiving your message.

#### Orientation

People may present themselves in various ways: face-to-face, side-to-side, or even back-to-back. For example, cooperating people are likely to sit side-by-side while competitors frequently face one another.

#### Posture

People can be lying down, seated, or standing. These are not the elements of posture that convey messages. Are we slouched or erect? Are our legs crossed or our arms folded? Such postures convey a degree of formality or relaxation in the communication exchange.

#### Physical contact

Shaking hands, touching, holding, embracing, pushing, or patting on the back all convey messages. They reflect an element of intimacy or a feeling of (or lack of) attraction.

## Dynamic features of non-verbal communication that provide information

### Facial expressions

A smile, frown, raised eyebrow, yawn, and sneer all convey information. Facial expressions continually change during interaction and are monitored constantly by the recipient. There is evidence that the meaning of these expressions may be similar across cultures.

### Gestures

One of the most frequently observed, but least understood, cues is a hand movement. Most people use hand movements regularly when talking. While some gestures (eg a clenched fist) have universal meanings, most of the others are individually learned and idiosyncratic.

### Looking

A major feature of social communication is eye contact. It can convey emotion or aversion, and signal when to talk or finish. The frequency of contact may suggest either interest or boredom.

The above list shows that both static features and dynamic features transmit important information from the sender to the receiver.

## Other important aspects of communication that provide information

### Paralanguage

Is the content of your message contradicted by the attitude with which you are communicating it? Researchers have found that the tone, pitch, quality of voice, and rate of speaking convey emotions that can be accurately judged regardless of the content of the message. The important thing is that the voice is important, not just as the conveyor of the message, but as a complement to the message. As a communicator, you should be sensitive to the influence of tone, pitch, and quality of your voice on the interpretation of your message by the receiver.

### Silence and time

Silence can be a positive or negative influence in the communications process. It can provide a link between messages, or sever relationships. It can create tension and uneasiness or create a peaceful situation. Silence can also be judgmental by indicating favour or disfavour, agreement or disagreement.

For example, by remaining silent when someone is displaying non-verbal cues of violence/anger you may avoid aggravating the situation and may actually prevent it from escalating.

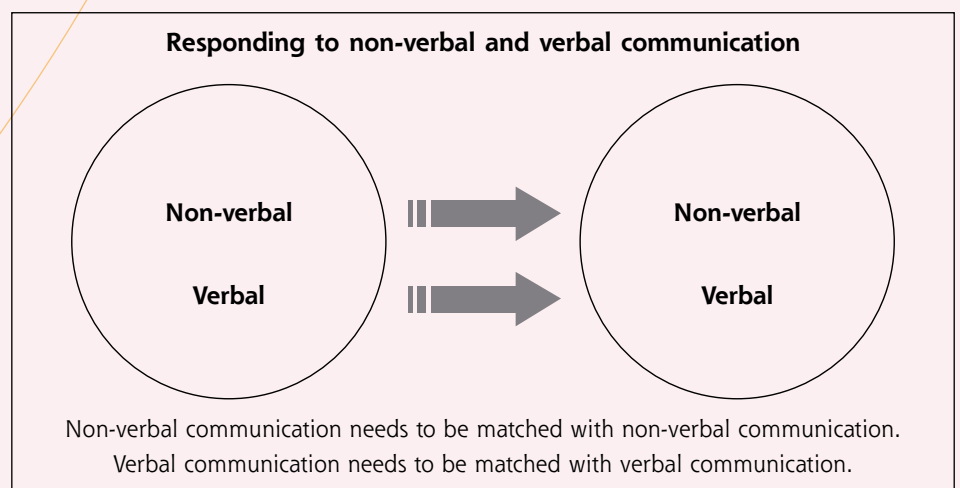
### Be aware

It is important for you to develop some sensitivity to non-verbal messages. Cooperation and communication improves as we recognise and respond appropriately to non-verbal cues. You have been aware of non-verbal communications all your life, but how much thought have you given them?

## Saying 'No': a guide to setting limits

At times it is difficult to say 'no' to requests that you do not want to meet. Saying 'no' means that you set limits on other people's demands for your time and energy when such demands conflict with your needs and desires. It also means that you can do this without feeling guilty.

In some cases, just saying 'no' or 'I'm not interested' in a polite, firm manner should suffice. If the other person persists, just repeat your statement without apologising.



If you need to make your statement stronger and more emphatic, you may want to 1) look the person in the eye, 2) raise the level of your voice slightly and 3) assert your position – 'I said no'.

### Three step procedure for saying 'no':

- Acknowledge the other person's request by repeating it
- Explain your reason for declining it
- Say 'no'.

Example: 'I know that you would like me to give you \$20 (acknowledgement), but I gave you \$20 this morning and I have already given you a lot of money over the last week (explanation), so I am not giving you any more now.'

Example: 'I know that you would like me to give you a lift to your friend's house (acknowledgement), but I believe that you are going there to take drugs and I don't want to support your drug-taking (explanation), so I won't give you a lift.'

### Important points to remember

#### Take your time

If you are the type of person who has difficulty saying 'no', give yourself some time to think and clarify what you want to say before responding to someone's request. Example: 'I will let you know by the end of the day.'

### Do not over-apologise

When you apologise to people for saying 'no', you give them the message that you are not sure that your own needs are as important as theirs. This opens the door for them to put more pressure on you to comply with what they want. In some cases, they may even try to play upon your guilt to obtain other things or to get you to 'make it up to them' for having said 'no' in the first place.

### Be specific

It is important to be very specific in stating what you will and will not do. Example: 'I won't give you money for cigarettes but I can take you to the shop and buy some for you.'

### Use assertive body language

Be sure to face the person you are talking to squarely and maintain good eye contact. Work on speaking in a calm but firm tone of voice. Avoid becoming emotional.

### Watch out for guilt

You may feel the impulse to do something else for someone after turning down his or her request. Take your time before offering to do so. Make sure that your offer comes out of genuine desire rather than guilt.

### Questions to think about:

In what circumstances do you find it hard to say 'no'?

Why is it hard to say 'no' in these situations?

What thoughts do you have at the time?

### Useful references

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia  
[www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au](http://www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au)

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria  
[www.mifellowship.org](http://www.mifellowship.org)

Mental Health Services Website (Vic)  
[www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth)

National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) (USA)  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

Mental Health Council of Australia  
[www.mhca.com.au](http://www.mhca.com.au)

SANE Australia  
[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

Beyond Blue  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

### Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia fact sheets

What can family and friends do to help a person experiencing mental illness?

Family and carer supports and services

Understanding guilt



**Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia**  
08 8221 5072  
[www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au](http://www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au)

**Mental Illness Fellowship of Sth Australia Inc**  
08 8221 5160 [www.mifsa.org.au](http://www.mifsa.org.au)

**NT Assoc of Relatives & Friends of the Mentally Ill Inc (NT ARAFMI)**  
08 8948 1051 [www.ntarafmi.org.au](http://www.ntarafmi.org.au)

**Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc**  
02 9879 2600 [www.sfnsw.org.au](http://www.sfnsw.org.au)



**Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria**  
03 8486 4200 [www.mifellowship.org](http://www.mifellowship.org)

**Mental Illness Fellowship Nth Qld Inc**  
07 4725 3664 [www.mifnq.org.au](http://www.mifnq.org.au)

**Schizophrenia Fellowship of Qld Inc**  
07 3358 4424 [www.sfq.org.au](http://www.sfq.org.au)

**Mental Illness Fellowship of WA Inc**  
08 9228 0200 [www.mifwa.com](http://www.mifwa.com)

**Canberra Schizophrenia Fellowship Inc**  
02 6205 1349