

How do I talk with my client? What should or shouldn't I say?

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You are meeting a client for the first time or perhaps you have seen this person for years. For one reason or another, the client is reticent to talk today and you are wondering what to say. A volunteer may encounter many situations where you feel unprepared or unfamiliar, especially when being with someone who may live differently than your lifestyle. At times you also may become overwhelmed with compassion and sympathy; you want to do something and yet you feel helpless. Remember that experienced therapists often feel the same way, as it is a delicate process when you enter into a person's life in a very personal way.

It is important to keep in mind that your volunteer position is one of the most important jobs. You may be the only person who really cares about this client. You may not believe this fact, however, even when a person has family or friends in their lives, those individuals are not necessarily loving or supportive. So, often just your presence alone, without conversation, is comforting to your client.

Sometimes you may feel inept or inexperienced and wonder how you can be helpful to a client. Interestingly, you do not even have to say anything and a client will know that you care about them just by looking at your face and body language. Of course, you want to do more than just stand or sit there, so let's talk about some specific strategies for those awkward times when conversation is challenging.

A basic rule is "less is more." It is always better to talk less than to say too much. It is not necessary or advisable to fill up the silent space. Oftentimes, people feel uncomfortable with the silence and tend to jump in to fill the void, but pauses in the conversation are often helpful as the client may be reflecting or processing. If the quiet does feel too long, an easy way to intervene is to ask, "Would you like to share with me what you were just thinking about?" giving the person the prerogative to keep things private.

As a volunteer, working with reticent or shy individuals is not unusual. As they get to know you, they may become more comfortable and open up the conversation. For those people who are not openly expressive, open-ended questions can get the process going. Questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" will usually not help the situation whereas questions like, "How did they do this when you were in school?" might give the person the interest to respond. It's best to use your judgment to decide whether it's a good idea to push someone further. You do not want the person to feel pressured or intimidated. Give your client some time to warm up to you before you become concerned, and if you have any questions, please call your partners at JFS for help.

Keeping in mind that "less is more," there are some basic guidelines for when the client is very openly expressive as well. Although it can be very tempting, it is best not to give advice, even when they ask you for advice. You could be taking a risk if you do advise a client, as one cannot assume that a client would act as you would. Other risk factors might be if your suggestion

backfires, the client will put the blame on you or if your advice is incorrect and the client acts, he/she could be harmed.

Instead of advice, there are other ways to help the person think about something that is on their mind. You can point out alternatives from a neutral position and present the pros and cons of each alternative. A conversation about the issues can be appropriate and questions such as, "Have you tried this before?" "Was the outcome positive?" or "Is it in your best interest to try this approach" can be helpful.

Remaining objective without judgment is another important strategy and just by picking up on a client's words, the person will feel valued and validated. For example, if the client is in rehabilitation and says, "I tried to walk further today but I did not reach my goal"; a volunteer can respond, "It was great that you tried to walk and reached half of your goal." In this way, the person feels positive about their efforts.

Volunteers working in direct service with clients are inherently kind, caring and compassionate. Your clients will naturally sense that about you and it is those attributes that are key to making a difference in someone's life. Keeping your comments simple, supportive and neutral will be the key in your conversations.

