

HOUSING QUALITY MATTERS

for FIRST NATIONS



Client Communication

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notes

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INTRODUCTION

This manual is designed to assist First Nations housing staff provide counselling services to their clients.

The term client relations officer is generic and may apply to any housing staff member who is responsible for providing housing information to clients or community members. Client relations officers work for either the band, tribal council or the housing authority. They are responsible for providing counselling to new and existing clients living in their community.

Client Communications refers to a service offered by housing staff and can be defined as the method of helping clients sort out and solve their housing problems.

This manual is intended to be used by client counsellors as a reference tool to assist in improving their counselling skills. For information related to the delivery or administration of CMHC housing programs, consult the policy and procedures manuals or contact the nearest CMHC office. In this manual you will find information on specific housing concerns of new and existing clients, tips and techniques that client relations officers can use to improve skills, and suggestions on how to deal with specific issues.

Note

This manual is written from a national perspective and may be supplemented with local counselling initiatives.

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

notes

At the end of the Workshop, participants will be able to:

- Understand the importance of Client Communication
- Improve the effectiveness of communication skills
- Develop and practise basic counselling skills and techniques using typical counselling situations.

A QUIZ FOR CLIENT RELATIONS STAFF

notes

Before you start reviewing the manual take a few minutes to complete this quiz. You don't need to show your answers to anyone.

On page 44 of your manual, there is another copy of the Quiz for client relations staff. After you have finished reading the manual, complete the Quiz again and see whether your answers differ. The answers are included on page 107.

Read each question and indicate your answer by checking either true or false.

Question	True	False
1 Client communication visits must always take place in the home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 It is best to ask talkative clients closed questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 The best client relations staff are qualified professionals, trained to work with clients.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 You should always have a written agreement with clients when dealing with arrears recovery.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 All clients must develop a personalized spending plan before moving into the home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 A client relations officer must be an active listener at all times.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Advising means helping clients to sort out and solve their problem.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 It is considered unproductive to communicate with clients over the phone.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

THE ROLE OF CLIENT RELATIONS STAFF

A client relations officer responsibility is to help clients identify and sort out problems which can prevent them from fully meeting their housing responsibilities. The client relations staff work with new and existing clients, and—sometimes—with applicants seeking housing assistance.

Depending on the program requirements or housing policies in the community, client relations staff may be required to provide advice or clarification on the following housing issues:

- Determine the eligibility and suitability of applicants for housing assistance.
- Explain to applicants, when necessary, why they are not eligible and provide information about alternative housing possibilities.
- Provide new clients pre-occupancy advise in areas such as maintenance and repair of homes, occupancy charges and an explanation of the lease or tenancy agreement.
- Provide post-occupancy advise on housing responsibilities to existing clients, as needed. This may include areas such as occupancy charges, maintenance and repairs, and health and safety issues.
- Inform clients about the responsibilities of the client relations staff, band, tribal council or housing authority that is responsible for providing housing services.

In addition to explaining housing issues, client relations staff must also be able to:

- Provide advice and assistance to clients to help them make informed decisions or resolve issues.
- Identify solutions that mutually benefit the clients and the housing provider.
- Conduct effective interviews to gather the information that is required to solve problems.
- Treat all clients fairly and recognize that no two clients are the same.
- Be aware of other agency or community services that can benefit clients and understand when and how to refer clients to these services.

notes

THE CLIENT INTERVIEW

There are four phases to conducting a successful client interview. The time required to complete the interview will vary from client to client depending on the relationship and the issues and concerns that are being addressed. It is also possible that four phases may not be completed in one visit.

Reviewing these steps in advance will increase the chances of completing a successful interview.

Phase 1 — Preparing for the visit

Preparing for the visit will assist you and the clients in getting the most out of the client interview. Ask yourself the following questions when preparing for the interview:

- Do you have a clear idea of the purpose of the visit? What do you hope to accomplish?
- Have you reviewed the client's file to determine if this is a new problem or one that you have discussed previously?
- Have you prepared the questions you may want to ask the clients and anticipated their answers?
- Have you anticipated the questions the clients may want to ask you? Are you confident of the answers you will provide?
- Have you brought your tools such as reference books, copy of the client's lease, application forms, calculators, etc.?
- Have you told the clients what information they need for the meeting, such as their list of concerns, proof of income, etc.?
- Did you confirm the time and location of the meeting with the clients?

Phase 2 — Opening the interview

The most important thing to do in this phase is to develop a good rapport with the clients. Take the time to make them comfortable talking to you.

You may find it helpful to use their names from time to time to personalize the interview.

Let the clients know you're interested in them. Listen closely to what is being said, as well as what is not being said. If they sense you are not listening, they will be discouraged from talking and probably unsatisfied with the session.

Reassure the clients that the information they provide will be kept confidential.

If you need to take notes during the interview, let the clients know what you are doing, show them the notes that you have taken. For information on taking effective notes, refer to page 28 of your manual.

Phase 3 — The body of the interview

During this phase, you must identify the main purpose for the interview. This may be as simple as explaining the program to interested applicants or new clients. This type of interview doesn't usually require much counselling, just providing basic information.



Often you will be responding to a specific issue that either you or the clients have identified. Examples of this would be issues such as maintenance and repairs or late housing payments.

Whatever the issue, you need to help the clients look beyond the symptom and to identify the real problem. For example, if they are in arrears, you may assume that the arrears are the problem. However, arrears are usually only a symptom of the real problem. They may have stopped making monthly payments because the house needs repairs and the clients feel that the band, tribal council or housing authority is not helping. In this case you must separate the issues, address each one and assist the clients in identifying a solution to each issue.

Once a problem is identified it's important to establish ownership of the problem. If the clients are responsible for the problem, you must get them to see it clearly and acknowledge their responsibility. If someone other than the clients is responsible, contact that person to solve the issue.

Ownership of the problem can usually be identified by talking with the clients about the issues and answering their questions. This can help clients better understand the situation.

Discuss with the clients how this problem or situation affects others, the consequences to them if the problem is not resolved, and the benefits they will see when the situation is corrected. The clients need to fully understand the problem before it can be solved.

When both you and the clients agree on the problem, you can work together to identify solutions. While you can suggest ideas, you should also encourage the clients to offer suggestions/solutions to correct the situation. Be sure to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each potential solution. Respect the solutions they offer—if you tell them what to do, you are not counselling.

At the end of this phase of the interview, you and the clients should have agreed on a solution to the problem and on an action plan to implement the solution.

Remember that for an action plan to be successful, it must be agreed to by both you and the clients.

Phase 4 — Closing the interview

Confirm the solution and the action that is expected to be taken by all involved parties. You should also decide if you need to have a written agreement or action plan with the clients. If the issue has occurred in the past, then you should consider having them sign a written agreement detailing the action plan that has been prepared.



Remember to plan how you will follow up with the clients. This can be as simple as a phone call, a visit, or just a review of the file.

Always leave on friendly terms so that the next visit will be just as effective.

Note: When finished with an interview be sure to give a copy of your notes and any action plan to the client and also include copies in the client's file.

In addition to following the four phases of a client interview, a client relations staff must also:

- Develop rapport and trust with the clients.
- Actively listen to their questions and concerns and respond appropriately.
- Provide the clients with a chance to talk about problems and concerns.
- Provide clear and concise information to help the clients make decisions.
- Discuss possible action plans but allow the clients to make their own decisions.
- Discuss and make referrals on non-housing related problems when appropriate.
- Plan follow-up after the visit.

TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

The next few pages provide information on different types of client communication activities that you may be involved with.

1. Pre-occupancy meeting

New clients should receive information before they move into the home. You should meet with them to explain their responsibilities related to the home. Discuss the local housing policies in place for your community for maintenance and repair, tenant damage, occupancy charges, etc.

For some clients, these responsibilities may mean that they need to learn new skills. For example, the clients may be unfamiliar with the mechanism of a forced-air furnace. Keep in mind that they may be reluctant to ask questions or voice concerns. A client counsellor must be aware of this and practice effective communications skills throughout the interview. Be sure that you listen carefully and use good questioning techniques. Refer to “Skills and Knowledge” on page 25.

The following list of activities will help you prepare for a pre-occupancy visit:

- Review the program requirements and the ongoing responsibilities of both the clients and the housing department.
- Review the client’s file and look for responsibilities that may be new to them. This includes details such as maintenance and repair responsibilities, and occupancy charges.
- Let the clients know what equipment/tools they may need to maintain the home (e.g., lawn mower, rakes, vacuum cleaner). If they need to purchase these items, they may appreciate an advance notice.
- If your community applies an occupancy charge, inform the clients of the amount, how it is determined and the preferred method of payment.

Occupancy Charges

If your community enforces an occupancy charge or rental payments, you will need to discuss with the clients how payments can be made.

There are four common payment methods. Assuming that your community accepts all four methods, your clients should choose the payment method that they are most comfortable with:

1. If clients are receiving social assistance benefits, see if you can arrange to have the payment sent directly to the housing department. This will ensure that clients do not fall into arrears.
2. Clients may wish to pay by cheque. Be sure that they write their account number and their full name on the cheque. Post-dated cheques are acceptable and can be provided for several months at a time.
3. Clients may wish to pay in cash. Stress that this must be done on or before the first of each month. Clients should always ask for, and be provided with, a receipt.
4. Clients may use pre-authorized payments that are automatically taken from their bank account on the due date. Ask clients to give you a void cheque so that you can record the account number.

Remind clients that they should contact the office right away if they have a problem with their payment.

Every family has different housing needs and lifestyle requirements. You should consider the following:

- Do the clients desire a specific location, e.g., close to family, work, schools, hospitals and support systems?
- Is the size and design of the house appropriate for their daily activities? Does it restrict their lifestyle unnecessarily?
- Does any member of the household have any disabilities that must be considered?
- If clients are responsible for the maintenance and repair of the home, do they have the resources to successfully do this?

These may seem like minor points to consider but if they are ignored they can result in clients not achieving maximum benefit from the housing assistance available.

2. Occupancy meeting

When the clients are ready to occupy the home you will need to conduct another visit. You may want to consider bringing a technical support representative with you during this visit. You will be covering a lot of information at this stage, some of which was discussed previously. Keep in mind that even though the information was covered before, it may be something that the clients will benefit from having repeated.

Some of the activities that you should plan to cover are:

- Review the rental-lease agreement to ensure that clients know and understand their responsibilities and the consequences of violating the lease.
- Complete a move-in inspection report to confirm the condition of the home before occupancy. The clients should be with you and help to identify deficiencies. Provide a copy of the report to the clients and keep one for their file.
- Explain and demonstrate the purpose of items such as the home's air exchanger, heating system, exhaust fans, circuit breakers and smoke detectors. Explain how they work and the importance of using and maintaining them properly.
- Check for household appliances or features that are covered under a warranty or manufacturer's guarantee (such as air exchanger and furnace). Review the warranties with the clients and discuss the importance of reporting defects. Fill out the warranty forms and return them immediately to the manufacturer. Make copies for your files.

- Discuss maintenance requirements of the property, including inside and outside work. Provide information on home maintenance for clients, as needed.
- Remind clients of the importance of practising safety in the home. Suggest that they plan and practise using a fire escape route.
- Suggest that clients prepare an emergency kit in case of power loss. This could include a flashlight (with batteries), candles and matches. It is also a good idea to have a supply of water and a basic first-aid kit stored in the house.
- Provide a list of emergency numbers to keep by the telephone (e.g., the fire department, police, hospital, ambulance).
- It may be beneficial to prepare a move-in package containing information that the clients can review on their own. Include information such as tips on conserving energy and saving money on utilities, and helpful hints on developing personalized spending plans. Check with local merchants or service providers who may have information that can be useful to your clients, such as special offers or coupons that can be used on household items.

Remember that the level of information required will vary. Use your best judgment in determining how much information should be provided.

3. Post-occupancy meeting

Post-occupancy meeting provides an opportunity to visit clients in their home and discuss concerns or problems. A follow-up visit should take place about six months after occupancy. Some clients will require additional visits. Use your best judgment when scheduling post-occupancy visits.

Remember that preparation is the key to successful counselling interviews. Your visit starts before you arrive at the home so be sure that you:

- Make an appointment with the clients.
- Suggest that the clients prepare a list of questions or concerns they have about the house.
- Review the client's file to see if there have been any problems.

During the home visit, the following activities should be completed:

- Review the responsibilities of the clients and the housing department. Although you've already discussed these items, try to be patient. The clients can only benefit from hearing the important points one more time.
- Walk through the home to determine if there are maintenance and repair deficiencies. If necessary, develop an action plan to resolve the issue.
- Be sure to monitor and keep records of home deficiencies. If action is required, plan to follow-up with the clients.
- Look for health and safety hazards around the home, such as items stored too close to the wood stove or furnace, matches, or hazardous products within the reach of children. Discuss why these are unsafe and suggest that they be removed.
- Never assume that after you have provided pre-occupancy, occupancy and post-occupancy meeting that your clients no longer have housing problems.

Clients will require ongoing counselling on different issues.

4. Maintenance and Repair Meeting

All homes eventually require maintenance or repairs to keep in good running order. If the clients are responsible for this function they must have a clear understanding of what their responsibilities are. If clients are not sure what is expected of them, or how and when to complete the work, it will probably never be done.

Some housing departments cover these requirements in the lease agreement while others may have a housing policy in place. Client relations staff must ensure that clients are aware of where these responsibilities are stated and that you provide your clients with a copy of the information.

When advising on maintenance and repair issues it is important to remember that not all clients were made aware of their responsibilities. Reasons that clients may not maintain the home include lack of skills, equipment or money to do the work. A client may simply not consider maintenance and repairs a priority.

When explaining maintenance and repair responsibilities, be sure to point out the benefits of living in a well-maintained home. Some of the more obvious benefits are:

- Maintenance can prevent costly repairs.
- Maintenance reduces health and safety concerns.
- Maintenance extends the life of a home.
- Maintenance helps to maintain the property's appearance.

If clients are responsible for maintenance and repairs, remind them of their duties. Be prepared to provide tips and techniques on home maintenance. It may be helpful to prepare an information kit that contains books, brochures and videos on home maintenance. You may also contact your local CMHC office about the *Basic Home Maintenance* workshop for home occupants or to obtain a list of publications that can benefit your clients.

notes

If clients seek your advice and you are unsure of the answer, contact an expert such as a housing inspector.

Once a problem is fixed, advise the clients how to prevent the problem from reoccurring.

If maintenance and repairs are the responsibility of the housing department, inform the clients of the process that will be used to address any problems.

If you notice damage to the property caused by negligence, find out what caused the damage and what the clients intend to do about it. Explain how client damage violates their lease and urge them to correct the problem as soon as possible.

Be sure to monitor and keep records of client damage. Clients will probably take the issue more seriously if they know that you keep a record of damage/repairs and stay in touch with them until the problem is resolved.

Some clients may wish to do renovations or modifications to the home. Review the lease agreement and the housing department's policy on this and let the clients know if they can do the work.

Maintenance and repair counselling work best when there is a housing policy in place that provides clarification of client responsibilities and enforces the consequences of not meeting their responsibilities.

5. Resolving Financial Issues

notes

Arrears recovery

You will eventually be involved in arrears counselling if your community charges rent or an occupancy charge. This will involve identifying why clients have missed payments and suggesting possible repayment solutions.

Always keep in mind that payment arrears are a symptom of the real problem. Your responsibility is to find out why the clients have missed or stopped making payments.

Some of the common reasons that clients may fall into arrears include:

- Dissatisfaction with the home.
- Deficiencies in the home.
- Other financial priorities.
- Housing is not a priority.
- Lack of understanding of their responsibilities.
- Realizing that other clients don't make their payments and they suffer no consequences.

Following these simple three steps will help you conduct a successful arrears interview.

1. Determine why clients are in arrears.

- When did the arrears first begin?
- Why have the clients not paid?
- Has the clients' income changed?
- Is this a recurring problem? If so, how often?

2. Assist clients in developing a realistic repayment schedule that is acceptable to all parties.

- You can offer to provide basic financial advice to develop a spending plan or refer the clients to professional debt or financial counselling services.
- If the clients have stopped paying because of deficiencies in the home and not because of financial reasons, provide the appropriate counselling.
- Review with clients the importance of making their payments and stress the consequences of non-payment.

3. Follow-up with clients

- As with all types of client communication you will have to plan and do a follow-up. Keep copies of written agreements or a summary of verbal agreement in the clients' file. Review the account to verify that payment has been made.
- Occasionally, you may be required to provide basic financial counselling for clients in arrears or for clients who want to gain greater control over their money. The following pages provide information on developing basic spending plans and referring clients for professional financial counselling.

Developing Spending Plans

Some clients require financial counselling to adjust to new financial responsibilities such as housing charges or maintenance costs. The following information will help you provide financial counselling to those clients who need to or would like to better control their spending.

Begin by explaining what a spending plan is and how it works.

A spending plan is a projection of how you will spend your money over a specific time period. It is also known as a budget.

Emphasize to clients that everyone can benefit from a spending plan. It is suggested that you use the term spending plan instead of budget. For most people, the term "budget" implies tight, unpleasant restrictions on their spending—something to be avoided.

Some clients may say that they don't need a spending plan or that they have tried budgeting before. This is not unusual as many people don't recognize the benefits of a spending plan.

Here are some of the benefits of a spending plan that you may wish to share with the clients. A spending plan can:

- Keep track of your money and help identify where and how it is spent.
- Help to reduce worry and or family arguments over money.
- Assist in saving for a special purchase or occasion.

Some clients will say they have tried budgeting before and it doesn't work. Spending plans will fail if they are not personalized, realistic, or given a fair chance to succeed.

Explain that a spending plan must be personalized, which means it must be based on the clients' income, living costs and spending priorities. The plan will tell the clients exactly how much money they have to work with, what their fixed expenses are, and how much money will be left over.

On page 20 of your manual, you will find an example of a monthly spending plan. Use this form, along with the four steps to develop a personalized spending plan.

Four Steps to Developing a Spending Plan:

1. List the net household income.

Net income is what you actually have left to spend each month after deductions. Complete a list of all household expenses such as rent, groceries, child care, entertainment, transportation. At first the clients may have to estimate some expenses. Be sure the estimates are realistic. Remind the clients of annual expenses, such as home insurance or vehicle licences. These annual costs should be divided by 12 and then included in the list of monthly expenses.

2. Review the list of expenses and discuss ways to reduce spending or perhaps increase income.

You may have some suggestions on how the clients could reduce living expenses or utility costs. When discussing this with the clients it is important to discuss wants versus needs.

A *need* is something that is required, such as housing, heat, food and clothing. A *want* is something we would like to have, but is not really necessary, such as a new bike, bingo money, etc.

Everyone has wants and needs and a good spending plan will help control and recognize wants.

You may suggest some ways to become more aware of spending for “wants,” even for such items as groceries. One suggestion is to use a shopping list to help to prevent impulse buying. Emphasize the importance of comparative shopping to get the best price and value.

Discuss the importance of setting aside money for savings and financial emergencies. Everyone has unplanned expenses that must be accommodated, such as car repairs, loss of employment, or an addition to the family.

3. Implementing and monitoring the spending plan.

It's necessary to keep track of all spending. The monthly spending plan provided in this Manual includes a category for planned and actual monthly expenses. Some of the more common ways to track spending are: when paying with cash write everything down in a note book, or save all receipts. If paying by cheque, record all purchases.

4. Making adjustments.

At the end of the first month (and for the next two or three months), the clients should list their actual expenses in each category. Clients may find they have underestimated spending in some categories and need to make adjustments to their spending plan.

Follow up with the clients at the end of the month to see how the plan went and discuss any problems. Was the spending plan realistic? Were there categories that were over the spending plan and/or under the spending plan? Were they able to keep good records of expenses and spending? Did they learn anything surprising about their expenses?

If the clients have difficulties, urge them to keep trying. Be encouraging, rather than critical. Remind them that it gets easier to follow a spending plan and that, when necessary, they can change some categories as long as they put the family's basic needs and financial obligations first.

Note

If clients require financial counselling beyond what you can provide, encourage them to seek professional help. You can refer them to organizations such as banks, credit unions, the Better Business Bureau, Industry Canada (Office of the Superintendent of Bankruptcy) and Debtor's Anonymous.

notes

Monthly Spending Plan

		Amount Spent	Amount Budgeted	Amount Spent
Credit/loan payments (list)* _____ _____				

Difference between
income and expenses \$

* For example: Merchant credit cards, car loan, etc.

6. Referrals to Other Agencies

Successful tenant relations staff is one who knows his or her limits and can recognize when clients need professional help.

Clients can have a non-housing problem that you identify but are not qualified to deal with (e.g., alcoholism). This problem can prevent them from meeting their responsibilities. If this happens, always refer the clients to the proper agency. Become familiar with agencies that you may need to refer clients to. Know what types of agencies and support services are available and develop a list of phone numbers and contact names. You are encouraged to add local resources to your list, including any community services that might benefit your client.

Your role is to discuss this with the clients and encourage them to seek professional help. In most cases, the clients may not be aware of the help that is available to them.

If you do feel that a referral to another agency would be helpful, handle it carefully. Clients may become hostile or feel that you have betrayed their confidence unless you handle the situation tactfully and discreetly.

If a referral is to be successful, the clients have to be willing to seek help.

Use the following guidelines in handling referrals for your clients.

1. Talk to the clients.

- Always discuss the situation with the clients before involving another counsellor or agency. Tell the clients why you feel the need to involve the agency. Explain that the new contact is trained to deal with specific issues and you are not.
- Let the clients know when a meeting will take place and who will be there. The clients may want you to attend the first meeting. If you do, provide moral support but do not become directly involved in the meeting or discussion.

2. Contact the necessary agency in person.

- Contact the other agency to explain the family's background before a meeting is scheduled with the clients. Bring your file notes with you.
- Be honest about the family and what type of help is needed, but do not discuss anything that is confidential or unrelated to the problem.
- Find out in advance what the counsellor plans to do. If the counsellor proposes changes (for example, removing some family members), be sure that you are aware of such proposals so that you can deal with the housing-related issues.
- Caution the counsellor about jeopardizing the relationship that you have established with the clients.
- You may want to ask the counsellor to check back with you on how the clients respond to recommendations or assistance provided by the agency.

The only time you should not discuss a referral with the clients is if you suspect that a family member is being abused physically, emotionally or sexually.

Report this immediately to the appropriate agency in your area. Do not discuss the matter with the clients before reporting suspected abuse. It can make the situation worse. The agency will conduct its own investigation and these types of referrals are kept confidential.

If you use another resource to help your clients, follow up with the resource person. This can be done by phoning or writing to the clients or counsellor to see how things went. If possible, drop in to see if things are improving.

Potential Child Abuse Cases

If you suspect that a child is being abused physically, emotionally or sexually, you should report this to the appropriate child welfare agency in your area. Under the *Child Protection Act*, you could be legally liable if you suspect abuse but fail to report it to the proper authorities. The child welfare agency will make its own investigation and will not advise the family of the source of the complaint.

SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

notes

Introduction

This section focuses on different skills that you can use to enhance your client counselling interviews. The information is non-housing related and not specific to any program or services.

The areas covered in this section are:

- Active listening skills
- Questioning skills
- Telephone interviewing skills
- Taking effective notes
- Conducting the interview

1. Active listening skills

Active listening is the most important skill that a client relations staff can use to gather information, analyze solutions and develop action plans to assist clients.

For most people, listening is not an easy skill to learn or to use. There have been several studies that show that most people have very poor listening skills. The average person remembers only half of what he or she has heard immediately after hearing it. It is critical that a client relations staff develop and use good listening skills.

There are a number of things that can distract people from listening. These distractions include:

- Thinking up a counter-argument or response while the speaker is still speaking.
- Looking for hidden motives.
- Evaluating the speaker.
- Being distracted by contradictory non-verbal messages.
- Thinking about something entirely different.

When interviewing clients or just having a discussion on any issue, pay full attention to what the clients are saying.

Paraphrase or reword what the clients have said to ensure that you understand each other.

Ten Tips for Good Listening

1. Stop talking.
2. Put the client(s) at ease.
3. Show the client(s) you are listening—focus your attention. Don't fidget or otherwise communicate non-verbally that you are not paying attention.
4. Concentrate fully on what the client(s) are saying. Don't distract your attention by formulating your response while the clients are still explaining themselves.
5. Empathize with the clients—try to understand how they think and feel.
6. Be patient. Give the clients time to express themselves and don't interrupt.
7. Hold your temper.
8. Don't argue, criticize, be judgmental or sarcastic.
9. Ask questions.
10. Stop talking.

Non-Verbal Communication

You often hear that body language speaks louder than words. Edward T. Hall, a social anthropologist, claims that 60 per cent of all communication is non-verbal. Others claim that this number is as high as 82 per cent. Regardless of the percentage that applies, keep in mind that the majority of all communication, both sent and received, is non-verbal.

Be aware that non-verbal communication can contradict verbal communication. For example, ". . . Everything is fine . . ." spoken by a person looking very sad, or ". . . I'm open to discussion . . ." spoken by a person with their arms and legs tightly crossed (a closed-to-communication body message) sends a mixed message to the listener and indicates that there could be a problem with what is being said.

Recognize non-verbal clues, like the ones noted above, and probe further by asking questions. Example: "Is that how you really feel about . . . ?" This will encourage the clients to talk to you and assist in identifying and solving problems.

Always be aware of differences in culture when conducting counselling interviews. Some clients may find specific non-verbal communication techniques offensive. For example, eye contact is not encouraged in some cultures and can be intimidating if used with clients who are unfamiliar with the technique.

To avoid sending mixed verbal and non-verbal messages, always be sincere and honest with your clients.

Learn to show support for the clients by being aware of both your non-verbal and verbal communication. Distracting non-verbal communication (shuffling papers, tapping your fingers) can be distracting to the clients and they will fail to really listen to what you are saying.

Non-verbal communication that can encourage people to talk:

- Use eye contact.
- Nod your head and lean into the conversation.
- Be conscious of the space between you and the clients.
- Smile and look interested in what they have to say.
- Use hand gestures that are natural to you.
- Keep a relaxed body posture.

Non-verbal that discourage or block communication:

- Threatening gestures (pointing or banging).
- Crossing arms, feet on desk or hands behind your head.
- Chewing gum.
- Sighing or yawning.
- Staring.
- Moving papers or files around.



2. Questioning skills

The best way to get the information you need is to be prepared to ask the right questions.

There are two basic types of questions that you will use: open questions and closed questions.

Open Questions

Open questions encourage clients to explain or elaborate on what they mean. When additional information is required ask open questions.

Example: "Why do you think this is difficult?"

Closed Questions

If you need specific information or want to limit the amount of information, ask closed questions. Closed questions will result in a very specific answer or, a simple "yes" or "no." Example: "Do you know how to change the filters on the furnace?"

3. Telephone Interviewing Skills

You can use your counselling skills while talking to clients on the phone. If clients call you to discuss a problem, they may want immediate action or it may be possible for you to address the issues right then rather than schedule an appointment.



Keep these simple rules in mind when speaking with clients on the phone:

- Your telephone manners should always be professional, courteous and friendly.
- Use your questioning skills to get the information you need.
- If the client is upset, try to calm the client down. Tell the client that you are listening and want to help sort out the problem. If the client doesn't calm down enough to let you get the facts, suggest that you will call back later or that the client call back when he or she has calmed down. If the client refuses, let someone else talk to him or her, such as your supervisor or someone familiar with this type of situation.
- Always verify information to make sure it's accurate.
- Explain what will happen next. If referrals are to be made, advise the client and provide the client with the name of the contact person and their telephone number.
- When you tell clients you will do something, be sure to follow through.
- Record the details of your conversation.

4. Taking Effective Notes



Be prepared to take brief notes on what is discussed along with the details of any plans developed during meetings or interview.

This does not have to be complicated. Think of it as a simple way to keep a history of a client's problems and concerns.

Your notes should be clear and to the point. During the interview, avoid trying to write down every word. Take note of the key points of the discussion.

Tell clients why you are keeping notes: they may be intimidated if they don't know the purpose of the notes.

Before the end of the visit, review the notes with the client so that everyone understands and agrees on what was discussed.

Your notes should accurately reflect the situation. Remember that the information may be useful to you or other staff later on.

5. Conducting the Interview



To have a successful interview you need to develop a rapport with the clients. You should encourage them to talk freely with you.

In addition to the four phases of a client interview you can use these helpful hints to encourage clients to talk.

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Give your clients time to respond. Don't rush them. They may feel uneasy discussing certain things, especially at first. Don't feel uncomfortable if there is a pause while they prepare their response.

- Stress to the clients that the information discussed in the interview is held in confidence. Reinforce this by never divulging any information about others.
- Never be sarcastic, patronizing or judgmental. If clients sense that you are making value judgments, they may not trust you.
- Use positive non-verbal communications when counselling. Don't shuffle papers, look out the window or glance at your watch.
- Focus your attention on the clients.
- Reinforce your understanding of what the clients are saying by repeating it in your own words. "From what you are saying, I understand that "
- Express warmth and understanding to show your support and interest.
- Avoid saying things such as:
 - I'm surprised you feel that way.
 - It's common knowledge that
 - Are you still working on that old problem?
 - Just grin and bear it.
 - Life is full of hard knocks.
 - Just make a decision. It's easy.

PRESENTATION SKILLS

Sometimes, the most effective way to share information is in the form of a presentation. This approach allows you to give a message to one or more people in a consistent manner.

Whether you will be speaking to one client, a small group of colleagues or a large group of people, improving your presentation skills will make you a more effective and convincing speaker.

The information on presentations skills is separated into two sections:

1. Preparation
2. Delivery

Whenever you are invited to make a presentation, consider these helpful hints in advance of the event

1. Preparation

Preparation is key to a successful presentation. You must be absolutely clear about your topic, what you want to accomplish and how much time you have on the agenda.

Determine the objective of your presentation. Know what you want to say.

Complete an audience analysis. Find out what they know or want to know about the topic. Identify their involvement with the issue as well as the number of people who will attend, their experience and expectations.

Develop the presentation in three sections — introduction, body and conclusion.

Introduction

- The introduction should be no more than five to 10 per cent of the total presentation. During the introduction, include your name, who you represent, how long you will speak and how you will handle questions.

- Some speakers use a story, statistics or a joke to introduce the presentation. If you choose this approach, be sure that the stories or statistics are correct and the humour is always in good taste and is not offensive.

Body of the Presentation

- To prepare the body of the presentation, begin by writing down all of the key points that you want to include. When you are finished, review your notes and group the points into two to four main points.
- You can list your main points either sequentially, chronologically or on a need-to-know basis. You may want to support these points by using examples, testimonials, quotes, visual aids, etc.

Conclusion

- Conclude your presentation by summarizing what you said, informing the audience how they can get in touch with you and thanking them for their time.

Helpful Hint:

Practise delivering your presentation in front of a mirror or to a small group of colleagues, friends or family. Be sure to use the props or any visual aids that you intend to use in your presentation.

Practice will increase your comfort with the content and you will appear more relaxed and confident.

2. Delivering the presentation

People will be more open to your message if you appear confident about what you are saying. The following points will help you deliver a successful presentation.

- **Posture:** Always stand up straight (but try to relax). Never slouch or lean to one side. Not only is this distracting but it also increases body tension.
- **Movement:** Body movement will help to release tension but should be kept to an appropriate level. If you are busy travelling around the room the audience may become distracted. If you remain in one spot, they may lose interest.
- **Gestures:** Most people have natural hand gestures that they use every day. These will get your message across and hold the attention of the audience. Avoid distracting hand gestures that take away from what you are saying. Also, be conscious of any noisy jewellery when using hand gestures or, jingling coins in your pants pocket.
- **Voice:** You should sound like you are interested and enthusiastic about what you are saying. Avoid using a monotone voice, long drawn-out sentences or jargon. All of this can contribute to losing your audience's attention
- **Eye Contact:** When speaking to the audience, be sure to look at the entire audience. Avoid continuous eye contact with one or two members. When answering questions, look at everyone in the audience to include them in your presentation.

Handling questions from the audience

If you plan to have a question period, inform the audience at the start of your presentation when you will be taking questions. When you are asked a question, before you answer, repeat the question to ensure that everyone in the room has heard the entire question.

If you don't know the answer to the question, don't try to bluff your way through. Most participants will likely see right through you or, you might provide totally inaccurate information and have to backtrack later. It is always better to be honest. Let them know that you will find out the answer and get back to them.

CLIENT INFORMATION WORKSHOP

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If you have several clients who will benefit from receiving the same information, consider holding a workshop. Some of the items that you can include in the workshop are client and housing department responsibilities, financial planning, maintenance and repairs, and home safety and security.

Workshops make efficient use of your time, promote group discussion, and give clients the opportunity to share ideas and resources and talk with other clients who may have similar concerns.

The success of a meeting or workshop depends largely on the amount of preparation and planning that is done.

The first step in planning a workshop is to define the goals and objectives. This determines and directs the outcome of the workshop.

Workshop objectives should be clear and specific. State them at the beginning of the workshop to ensure everyone is informed.

Decide who should be involved and how many people will attend. Deciding who should attend a workshop will depend on the purpose. For example, a workshop called to resolve a specific problem should include those directly involved, plus any resource people who may be able to provide support information.

Once you've decided who should be invited to attend, find out as much about them as possible. This will help you plan and present your material effectively. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How many people will attend?
- How much do they already know about the subject of the workshop?
- How will they react to the information?
- Do any of the participants have special needs?

Helpful hints to consider when planning a client workshop

- Determine purpose of the workshop.
- Decide who should be invited.
- Consider the best time and place for the workshop.
- Make a list of all routine details that need to be taken care of before the workshop.
- Decide how you will evaluate the workshop.

1. The Agenda

Whenever possible, provide the agenda in advance to participants. This will help participants know what to expect during the workshop. An agenda should include the following:

- The purpose of the workshop (clearly state the objectives).
- Date, location, starting time, and wrap-up time. If participants are unfamiliar with the location, include a map with directions.
- The contact person's name and phone number (in case there are questions or to confirm participation).
- A list of all participants who have been invited.
- Time for questions from the participants.



Include a covering letter to participants providing details of what they need to bring, availability of child care service, reimbursement for expenses, etc.

2. Setting Up the Meeting Room

During preparation you will have to decide where the meeting will be held and how to set up the meeting room. Keep these points in mind when setting up your meeting.

- The room should be quiet. Arrangements should be made to minimize or eliminate outside interruptions during the workshop.
- If the workshop is held at an office, tell the secretary or receptionist the time of the workshop and who is attending. Ask them to inform all incoming callers that workshop participants are unavailable.
- The meeting room should be adequate in size for the number of participants.
- The room should have adequate lighting for reading or taking notes.
- The room should have sufficient electrical outlets for items such as a coffee maker, microphones, a slide projector.
- Set up audio-visual aids so that they can be clearly seen by everybody in the room. Test all of the equipment before the workshop.
- The room will need to have enough tables and chairs for everybody. Each participant should be able to see the speaker and have sufficient space to work.

3. Conducting the Workshop

As the organizer of the workshop your role is to ensure that things run smoothly and that participants are as comfortable as possible. The following points will assist you in conducting a successful workshop:

- Be mindful of local customs. Find out if you should include an opening ceremony or prayer, a guest speaker, etc.
- Opening comments should be positive and designed to encourage participants' involvement.

- If handouts are being provided, ensure there are enough for all participants.
- Where there are guest speakers, take notes or ensure that someone records the major points. Be prepared to summarize the highlights of the workshop at its conclusion.
- Watch your schedule and finish the workshop on time. If the agenda has a very tight schedule, you may decide to defer one or more of the less crucial items to the next workshop.

4. Facilitating tips and techniques

If you are the workshop facilitator your job will be to ensure the following:

- Keep the discussion on track. If a participant is off topic, restate the topic to get the discussion back on track.
- Balance the discussion, don't allow one person to dominate the session.
- Try to keep the workshop lively. It's up to you to keep things interesting. Encourage participation by all of those present and stick to the agenda. If participants appear restless, take a short break.
- If you have to cut a discussion short, relate the speakers' comments to a statement that summarizes the discussion.
- Stay neutral. Be careful not to sway the discussion or be critical of anyone's comments. Being critical or opinionated will discourage open discussion and communication.
- Summarize key points to ensure that people have understood the message.

COMMON COMMUNICATION ISSUES

notes

Client communication can be very demanding and stressful at times. The counsellor must take steps to avoid burnout. Sometimes you will have to work with clients with problems that will be difficult for you to deal with.

Remember that your mental health must come first or you will not be able to successfully counsel clients. If you find yourself becoming stressed or tired of listening to clients, it may be time to take a break.

To reduce stress, be aware of and try to avoid these common stress "traps."

- **Getting too involved with clients**

You may work with clients who feel that they have no one else to turn to or that no one else cares about them. Be careful that, in your efforts to help them, they do not become too dependent on you.

Your job is to help the clients understand the situation and refer them to outside help, if necessary. Encourage them to seek out professional help or family support. Maintain a professional working relationship with clients at all times.

- **Taking sides with clients**

Some problems involve more than one person, and you may have a working relationship with both people. Each person will have a different perception of the problem and will usually feel strongly about the issue.

When working with two or more clients, remain neutral and be absolutely sure of all sides of the situation before recommending any action. Keep in mind that you will have a continuing working relationship with these individuals.

- **Communicating with family and friends**

You may be expected to have a professional relationship with family or friends. Sometimes, they may expect to be treated differently or given special considerations. If necessary, be firm and advise them that no special considerations will be made.

To avoid having other clients think you may be treating family or friends differently, it's important that you treat all clients equally. Follow the policy or direction set out by the housing department. In some situations, you may need to declare a conflict of interest and refer the file to another housing staff member. Once you have done this, respect the decisions of the other counsellor

1. Handling Complaints

You may have to handle complaints from clients or other community members who contact you to comment on situations such as: noise or late night visitors, messy yards, unlicensed vehicles, extra people living in the home, dogs running loose, neighbours' children playing in their yard, or clients leaving homes empty for lengthy periods of time.

When you receive a complaint, determine if it is a housing problem or a situation that should be handled by someone else. Problems not related to housing should be referred to the appropriate agency. Wherever possible, have the caller take the necessary action to contact the agency.

If it is a housing problem, inform the caller that you will look into the situation. Sometimes the caller will offer a suggestion to resolve the problem. Be careful that you don't get involved in a detailed conversation about your clients. Always maintain your clients' confidentiality. Remember that you need to talk with your clients so that you can be sure of the real issue.

Here are some typical examples of complaints and how to deal with them:

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- A client is having loud parties all night and is disturbing the neighbours. You have two possible options:
 - If you use a lease agreement, check to see if excessive noise or late night parties are considered a violation.
 - Advise one of the neighbours to contact the authorities if the situation reoccurs.
- A neighbour complains about dogs running loose and tearing up her yard and gardens.
 - Meet with the owner of the dogs and explain the situation. Suggest that the dogs be kept on a leash or fenced-in. If your community has a bylaw about pets, provide a copy of the lease to the client and explain the related clauses. In some cases the neighbour may expect reimbursement for his or her loss. This should be left up to the client to work out with the complainant.
- Community members complain about a certain client often goes away and leaves the home vacant for long periods of time. They don't feel that this client should be getting housing assistance.
 - Remind the caller that clients are expected to honour the conditions of the housing policy (or their lease) and that you can only take action if the lease has been violated. Find out if the client does in fact leave the home vacant for long periods of time. Advise the client on what he or she should do to ensure that the house is properly cared for before going away. If you have a lease, review the vacancy clause to determine what is considered a violation, and advise the client.

2. Do's and Don'ts of Client Communication

DO:

- Make your clients feel comfortable.
- Be courteous and friendly.
- Treat your clients with respect.
- Be honest, objective, flexible and non-judgmental.
- Assure the clients of confidentiality.
- Return calls promptly.
- Know your clients' literacy skills.
- Speak clearly and slowly and review important concepts to make sure the clients understand them.
- Encourage clients to talk, express their concerns and ask questions.
- Be an active listener; remember that the exchange of information works both ways.
- Try to understand the clients' point of view.
- Be patient, understanding, supportive and concerned about your clients.
- Keep notes for future reference.
- Offer suggestions to clients but give them options and let them make their own decisions.
- Let clients know about any follow-up work you will be doing and when.
- Involve outside resources when necessary.
- Make sure the clients understand the program and their responsibilities, as well as the Band's responsibilities.
- Remember that there is no one correct approach to client communication.

DON'T:

- Assume clients understand—make sure.
- Gossip with clients about other clients or issues; maintain a helpful but professional relationship.
- Discredit other workers or agencies clients may have been involved with.
- Intimidate clients with your authority.
- Patronize clients or make value judgments about them.
- Overdress and give the appearance of being better than clients.
- Use jargon.
- Be misleading; provide facts when asked by clients.
- Create unrealistic goals or expectations for your clients.
- Relate to clients by bringing up your problems; they want to talk about their problems, not yours.
- Be late for appointments.

A FINAL NOTE

Client relations can, at times, be very demanding and stressful. You will work with people who you may not personally like or approve of, or people with whom you have a personal relationship. You may be required to counsel clients with problems that are difficult for you to deal with.

Your mental health must come first or you will not be able to assist your clients. The following points may help you deal with the everyday stress and avoid burnout.

- Know your limits. Be realistic about how much you can do for your clients.
- When clients need professional help, refer them to the appropriate agency.
- Recognize that you can't help clients who will not help themselves.
- Organize your work schedule to allow for a balance in your home and work life.
- Develop a network of other resources. You can seek advice and support from them.
- Know when to take a break.

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