

# Strengthening My Communication Skills<sup>1</sup>

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## Strengthening My Communication Skills

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### Communication

**Communication** is the activity of sharing information.

It requires:

- a sender
- a message
- a receiver.

The communication process is complete when the receiver understands the sender's message.

The “information” exchanged through communication can be:

- Facts
- Feelings
- Ideas
- Opinions

People communicate both **verbally (with words)** and **nonverbally (with body language)**.

#### **Why is communication important in long-term support services?**

**Communicating facts accurately** is important for providing quality care.

**Communicating feelings accurately** is important for building strong relationships with consumers.

## Body Language and Effective Listening

“Body language” means the way we communicate without actually speaking. It’s what we “say” by the way we move when we are speaking or listening. It includes facial expressions, eye contact, hand gestures, and the way you stand or sit when someone is talking to you.

### **Read how these PAs manage their body language.**

#### **Lonnie's tip—Put on a happy face.**

“People can often tell how I feel by the look on my face. So I try to smile.”

#### **Ed's tip—Look consumers in the eye.**

“I look people in the eye as much as possible. This is extra important when I help someone bathe or use the toilet. Eye contact lets them know I respect them.”

#### **Donna's tip—Position yourself at eye level with consumer.**

“So many of my consumers are sitting or in bed when I’m working with them. When we’re talking, I try to sit or otherwise get down to their eye level, so they don't have to look up at me all the time.”

#### **Drew's tip—Touch people gently.**

“I try to touch consumers as gently as possible. But before I touch someone, I always ask if it's OK. Some people don't mind being touched. Some people really like it. And then others don't like it at all. So it's important to ask.”

#### **Mandy's tip—Use a friendly voice.**

“People really pay attention to the tone of my voice. So I try to make my voice sound warm and caring.”

## Body Language and Effective Listening

**Body language is important for effective listening.** Here are some of the ways we show whether we are listening—or not—with our body language.

### Poor listening

- Looking at a clock, watch, or cell phone while someone is talking
- Answering your cell phone or making a call
- Whistling, humming
- Writing, sketching, doodling
- Fidgeting, yawning, stretching
- Looking away

### Effective listening

- Looking at the person who is talking (except in cultures where eye contact is a sign of disrespect)
- Turning your cell phone off if it rings while the other person is talking
- Sitting still or leaning forward, towards the person who is talking
- Nodding, smiling (if appropriate)

Part of being a good listener is **paraphrasing**. This means saying in your own words what you heard someone say, or what you perceived from the other person's body language.

#### **The purposes of paraphrasing:**

- To confirm or clarify what the other person means
- To show that you have heard the other person

#### **How paraphrasing helps improve communication with consumers:**

- It shows you are listening.
- It helps avoid confusion.
- It helps keep you focused on the consumer.
- It helps you remember better what the consumer said.
- It helps you cool down when you feel angry.

#### **Mandy's example—It helps avoid confusion.**

“Sometimes, when I say things back in my own words, I find out that I didn't understand what the person was trying to say. With paraphrasing, if I don't understand, they can tell me right away and we don't get all confused.”

#### **Jon's example—It helps keep you focused on the consumer.**

“Sometimes people say things that make me feel really emotional. Paraphrasing helps me focus and brings me back to what the other person is really saying. That makes it easier for me to stay calm.”

**Here are some ways to start a paraphrase:**

“Are you saying that ...”

“Did I hear you say ...”

“So what you’re saying is ...”

“Am I hearing you right that ...”

“I believe that you are saying ...”



## Asking Closed and Open-Ended Questions

It's important to know the difference between closed and open-ended questions. Both kinds of questions are useful for different situations.

### Closed questions:

- Can be answered by “yes” or “no” or a few words
- Help you get information
- Can stop the conversation
- Require many questions to get the full story
- Begin with *did, do, are, is, when*

### Examples:

“Do you want me to get your sweater now?”

“How many cookies do you want?”

“When did you see the doctor?”

### Open-ended questions:

- Encourage a longer answer
- Help you clarify information
- Help you find out thoughts and feelings
- Keep the conversation open; allow people to tell their story
- Begin with *how, what, why*

### Examples:

“How can I help you prepare lunch?”

“Why do you look so sad?”

“What did you think of the movie you saw yesterday?”

## Reacting Emotionally vs. Pulling Back—You Choose

Often, people and situations can make you feel a lot of emotion. You may become angry, hurt, frustrated, confused, or sad. When you react emotionally, listening becomes difficult. What you say may add to the emotions in the situation and make it more difficult to solve the problem.

No matter what you feel inside, you have a **CHOICE** in how to respond to a person, to their behavior, or to a situation. You can react emotionally, or you can pull back.



**You Have a Choice**



### Reacting Emotionally

Defend your opinions

Prepare your response

Look for evidence to  
show you're right

Ignore anything that says  
you're wrong

### Pulling Back

Put your opinions on hold

Listen carefully

Be curious about why  
the person is doing that or  
thinking like that

Stay open to changing  
your opinion, based on what the  
other person says

### **Pulling Back: An Overview**

“Pulling Back” means pausing, becoming aware of your emotions, getting them under control, and then clearly observing and assessing the situation.

- If you can stay calm and think clearly, you will be able to handle an emotional situation better.
- Pulling back allows you to think better, listen better, understand better what is happening, and reply more constructively.

### **Steps for Pulling Back**

1. Notice your emotional reactions and judgments.
2. “Freeze” your reaction—put it aside.
3. Put your attention back on the other person.

**Trigger Points—When Emotions Get in the Way of Listening**

**What behaviors, people, or situations trigger your emotions?**

- \_\_\_1. When I hear the same complaint over and over again...
- \_\_\_2. When I feel personally blamed or attacked for something that isn't my fault...
- \_\_\_3. When I think the other person is lying...
- \_\_\_4. When I know I'm right but no one will listen to me...
- \_\_\_5. When I'm tired, stressed, hungry, or in pain...
- \_\_\_6. Others: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Pull-Back Strategies**

Pull-back strategies in the moment

- Take a deep breath
- Silently count to five
- Silently say a personal affirmation such as “I have the strength to deal with what’s happening here”

Strategies to prepare for a stressful situation

- Talk to someone else about the situation
- Listen to soothing music
- Rehearse what you plan to say
- Plan a time to talk when there won’t be any interruptions or distractions
- Imagine yourself staying calm and collected during the situation

**What is your usual pull-back strategy?** Write at least one method you use *in the moment* and one to use to help you *prepare for* stressful situations.

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### Review: Communication and Self-Management Skills

**The following skills are important to communication effectively and build relationships in direct care work:**

- Clear, nonjudgmental language to communicate a thought or idea
- Nonverbal listening skills (effective body language) to show attention, understanding, and concern. Effective body language includes postures, facial expressions, and movement.
- Paraphrasing, or repeating back in our own words what the speaker has said, in order to clarify or confirm that we understand.
- Asking open-ended questions to get more information
- Pulling back when a conversation becomes stressful. This helps us stay calm and listen more effectively to the other person.

### Communication Skills Practice

**Instructions:** Each of these statements is something that a consumer-employer might say to a PA. Think about how, as a PA, you could respond by pulling back, listening, paraphrasing, and asking open-ended questions. Be prepared to role-play your response.

1. “Look, I’m not hungry. And I know I haven’t eaten all day, but I’m tired and just want to sleep. You’re not my mother!”
2. “You don’t know how to cook anything the way I want it! Why can’t I find someone to work for me who knows how to cook?”
3. “You’re always late! I’m going to start looking for another personal assistant who can be on time.”
4. “Ouch—you’re too rough with me! I’ve never had so many bruises.”
5. “I don’t care if you learned a different way to help someone move on onto the bed from a wheelchair in your other job. I keep telling you that *this* is the way you have to help *me*.”