CHAPTER 6

Verbal Following, Exploring, and Focusing Skills

Chapter Overview

Chapter 6 introduces verbal following skills and their uses in exploring client concerns and focusing. This chapter includes skills for accurately following and reflecting what clients are expressing and feeling about their situation. It also introduces skills for helping clients to consider taking action about concerns for which they have mixed feelings. These skills are the building blocks for social workers' efforts to communicate empathically with clients. In addition to being helpful in work with clients in micro practice, such skills are useful at the mezzo level in work on behalf of clients, through advocacy, and in work with colleagues and other professionals. This chapter also includes references to videos accompanying the text.

As a result of reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Construct reflective responses that respond to content and emotions, including both simple reflections and double-sided reflections.
- Construct furthering responses, and know when to use them.
- Construct open-ended questions, and know when to use them.
- Construct closed-ended questions, and know when to use them.
- Construct responses to seek concreteness.
- Construct responses to provide and maintain focus.
- Construct summarizing responses, and know when to provide them.

EPAS Competencies in Chapter 6

This chapter will give you the information needed to meet the following practice competencies:

- Competency 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice
- Competency 6: Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
- Competency 7: Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

MAINTAINING PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTACT WITH CLIENTS AND EXPLORING THEIR PROBLEMS

Verbal following involves the use and sometimes blending of discrete skills that enable social workers to maintain psychological contact with clients on a moment-by-moment basis and to convey accurate understanding of their messages. Moreover, verbal following behavior takes into account two performance variables that are essential to satisfaction and continuance on the part of the client:

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1. **Stimulus-response congruence:** The extent to which social workers' responses provide feedback to clients that their messages are accurately received.
2. **Content relevance:** The extent to which the content of social workers' responses is perceived by clients as relevant to their substantive concerns.

Skills in following have been related to client continuance (Rosen, 1972). Further, incongruent responses to clients have been more associated with discontinuance (Duehn & Proctor, 1977). Continued use of questions and other responses that are not associated with previous client messages and that do not relate to the client's substantive concerns contribute to consistent client dissatisfaction. One study of the outcome of working with persons with drinking problems found that two-thirds of the variance of outcomes after six months was predicted by the degree of empathy demonstrated by the counselors (Miller, 1980). Effective use of attending behaviors and demonstrated empathy should enhance motivational congruence (the fit between client motivation and social worker goals), a factor that is associated with better outcomes in social work effectiveness studies (Reid & Hanrahan, 1982). Employing responses that directly relate to client messages and concerns thus enhances client satisfaction, fosters continuance, and greatly contributes to the establishment of a viable working relationship. Studies of practice by social work students of the skills taught in this book have shown that while most of the practice skills of second-year students were not significantly more advanced than those of first-year students, the second-year students were better able to focus on tasks and goals, an objective of this chapter, compared with first-year students (Deal & Brintzenhofeszok, 2004).

Clients do not always perceive social worker questions about concerns as helpful. While noting the differences within Asian and Pacific Islander groups, including those with immigrant and resident status, Fong (2007) notes that some Asian clients (as well as members of other groups) may express emotional conflicts in a physical form. In such cases, the social worker must be respectful of the client's experience with the physical concern as well as explain the rationale for asking questions about factors such as family background that are not directly related to the physical complaint (Cormier & Nurius, 2003). The linkage of these issues to their current symptoms is not clear to many clients. Some Asian clients conceive of mental distress as the result of a physiological disorder or character flaws. This issue must be dealt with sensitively before any useful therapeutic work can occur (Fong, 2007). Similarly, clients who are members of historically oppressed groups may perceive questions as interrogations not designed to help them with their own concerns but rather as ways to explore whether they have broken the law or endangered their children. That is, they may not readily assume that the social worker is acting as their agent or advocate but rather as an agent of the state or majority community and hence a potential danger to their family (Sue, 2006).

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Getting Back to Shakopee," the potential client, Valerie, has been referred to an employee assistance program by her employer. She asks many questions about who will gain access to the information shared in their sessions. These questions reflect a concern that her answers about child care and adult supervision could result in a child welfare investigation.

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In addition to enabling social workers to maintain close psychological contact with clients, verbal following skills serve two other important functions in the helping process. First, they yield rich personal information, allowing social workers to explore clients' problems in depth. Second, they enable social workers to focus selectively on components of the clients' experiences and on dynamics in the helping process that facilitate positive client change.

The following pages introduce a variety of skills for verbally following and exploring clients' problems. Some of these skills are easily mastered. Others require more effort to acquire. The exercises in the body of the chapter will assist you in acquiring proficiency in these important skills. Although empathic responding is the most vital skill for verbally following clients' messages, we have not included it in this chapter because it was discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Later, we discuss the blending of empathic responses with other verbal following skills to bolster your ability to focus on and fully explore relevant client problems.

VERBAL FOLLOWING SKILLS

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The discrete skills highlighted in this chapter include seven types of responses:

1. Furthering responses
2. Reflection responses
3. Closed-ended responses
4. Open-ended responses
5. Seeking concreteness
6. Providing and maintaining focus
7. Summarizing

We will discuss each of these skills in turn.

FURTHERING RESPONSES

Furthering responses indicate social workers are listening attentively and encourage the client to verbalize. There are two types of furthering responses: *minimal prompts* and *accent responses*.

Minimal Prompts

Minimal prompts signal the social worker's attentiveness and encourage the client to continue verbalizing. They can be either nonverbal or verbal.

Nonverbal minimal prompts consist of nodding the head, using facial expressions, or employing gestures that convey receptivity, interest, and commitment to understanding. They implicitly convey the message, "I am with you; please continue."

Verbal minimal prompts consist of brief messages that convey interest and encourage or request expanded verbalizations along the lines of the client's previous expressions. These messages include "Yes," "I see," "But?," "Mm-mmm," "Tell me more," "And then what happened?," "And?," "Please go on," "Tell me more, please," and other similar brief messages that affirm the appropriateness of what the client has been saying and prompt him or her to continue.

Accent Responses

Accent responses (Hackney & Cormier, 2005) involve repeating, in a questioning tone of voice or with emphasis, a word or a short phrase. Suppose a client says, "I've really had it with the way my supervisor at work is treating me." The social worker might reply, "Had it?" This short response is intended to prompt further elaboration by the client.

REFLECTION RESPONSES

Reflections are used to respond to both content messages and affect. There are several forms of reflection. We will discuss simple, complex, and double-sided reflections, as well as reflections with a twist.

Reflections of Content

Reflections of content emphasize the cognitive aspects of client messages, such as situations, ideas, objects, or persons (Hackney & Cormier, 2005).[1] Reflecting a content message in response to a client's thoughts does not mean that you agree with or condone those thoughts. The following are four examples of reflections of content:

Example 1

Senior client: I don't want to get into a living situation in which I will not be able to make choices on my own.

Social worker: So independence is a very important issue for you.

Example 2

Client: I went to the doctor today for a final checkup, and she said that I was doing fine.

Social worker: She gave you a clean bill of health, then.

Example 3

Native American client: The idea of a promotion makes me feel good; I could earn more money.

Social worker: So advancement would show that you are being recognized for the quality of your work.

Example 4

Managed care utilization reviewer: We don't think that your patient's condition justifies the level of service that you recommend.

Social worker: So you feel that my documentation does not justify the need that I have recommended according to the approval guidelines you are working from.

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Elder Grief Assessment," the social worker asks a recently widowed senior client what she would like to see occur at the end of their work together. The client replies: "I would like to feel better myself, the house looking better, the yard looking better, I would like to go grocery shopping when I want to, get to the doctor without calling someone." The social worker, Kathy, paraphrases the content by saying, "You would like to remain independent."

Note that in Example 4, reflection of content is used as part of the communication with a person whose opinion is important because it relates to delivering client services—the health insurance care manager (Strom-Gottfried, 1998a). When employed sparingly, reflection of content may be interspersed with other facilitative responses to prompt client expression. Used to excess, however, such reflection produces a mimicking effect. Reflection is helpful when social workers want to bring focus to an idea or a situation for client consideration.

Exercises in Reflection of Content

In the following exercises, read each client/colleague statement and formulate written responses that reflect the content of the statement. Modeled responses for these exercises appear at the end of the chapter (see page 166).

Client/Colleague Statements

1. ***Client:*** I can't talk to people. I just completely freeze up in a group.
2. ***Wife:*** I think that in the last few weeks I've been able to listen much more often to my husband and children.
3. ***Senior client:*** It wasn't so difficult to adjust to this place because the people who run it are helpful and friendly and I am able to make contacts easily—I've always been a people person.
4. ***Mother*** *[speaking about daughter]:* When it comes right down to it, I think I'm to blame for a lot of her problems.
5. ***Member of treatment team:*** I just don't see how putting more services into this family makes sense. The mother is not motivated, and the kids are better off away from her. This family has been messed up forever.

Reflections of Affect

Reflections of affect focus attention on the affective part of the communication (Cormier, Nurius, & Osborn, 2009). In reflections of affect, social workers relate with responses that accurately capture clients' affect and help them reflect on and sort through their feelings. Sometimes social workers may choose to direct the discussion away from feelings for therapeutic purposes. For instance, a social worker might believe that a chronically depressed client who habitually expresses discouragement and disillusionment would benefit by focusing less on feelings and more on actions to alleviate the distress. When the social worker chooses to deemphasize feelings, paraphrases that reflect content are helpful and appropriate.

Forms of Reflections

Simple reflections, which identify the emotions expressed by the client, are a heritage from nondirective, client-centered counseling. That is, they simply identify the emotion. They do not take a stand or attempt to help the client deal with the emotion. They do not go beyond what the client has said or directly implied (Moyers et al., 2003).

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "How Can I Help?," social worker Peter Dimock works with Julie, a client who is recovering from drug use and is involved with the child welfare system. When Julie shares her frustration about all the things she has to do on her case plan, Peter responds with a simple reflection that stays close to her message of being overwhelmed.

Julie: "Well it's just really hard getting around with baby and I just, you know, I've got a

lot of stuff that I'm supposed to be doing for my case plan and I just am having a really hard time getting to all the places on time."

Peter: "Well you've been pretty stressed, it sounds like. Having to do all these things and get around and make it to all of your appointments, it's pretty overwhelming."

Complex reflections go beyond what the client has directly stated or implied, adding substantial meaning or emphasis to convey a more complex picture. These reflections may *add content* that focuses on meanings or feelings that the client did not directly express (Moyers et al., 2003). For example, when a teenaged client said, "My mother really expects a lot from me," a social worker made a response that added implied content by saying, "She has high expectations for you; she thinks that you have a lot of ability." *Verbalizing an unspoken emotion* is a form of reflection that names an emotion that the client has implied but not stated. When a teenaged client reflects on what it feels like to be new to her school by saying, "I'm new here. I don't know anyone. I just try to stick to myself and stay out of trouble," the social worker could verbalize, "That sounds to me as if it could be a little lonely," to tune in to the unspoken emotion of sadness.

A **reframe** is another form of adding content. Here, the social worker puts the client's response in a different light beyond what the client had considered (Moyers et al., 2003). For example, when a client reported on earlier drug treatment experience, he emphasized failure, saying, "I have gone through treatment three or four times. Maybe one of these times, I will get it right." The social worker chose not to agree with the failure message but rather reframed to say, "It sounds as if you have persisted, trying treatment again after earlier disappointments; you haven't given up on yourself."

Sometimes, the reflection can use a metaphor or simile to paint a picture of what the client has stated. For example, when a client commented about his job, "I just do the same thing every day, nothing ever changes or ever gets better, always the same," the social worker responded, "It sounds like a rat in a maze" (Moyers et al., 2003). Sometimes the reflection might focus on *amplification*, either strengthening or weakening the intensity of client expression (Moyers et al., 2003). For example, a client shared, "I am disappointed with how long this has taken," and the social worker chose to emphasize the strength of the implied feeling by saying, "You are really frustrated and exhausted by all the time you have put into this with little to show for it." On the other hand, when a client expressed doubts about her abilities, saying, "I never get anything right," the social worker chose to agree but weaken its intensity, "Sometimes you doubt whether you can succeed."

Sometimes clients express indecision and conflict between several alternatives. In such circumstances, it is possible to present a **double-sided reflection** that captures both sides of the dilemma that is fostering ambivalence about acting (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). For example, a teen parent had expressed that she wanted to succeed both in school and as a parent and one day become a probation officer or social worker. On the other hand, in their discussion she had reported frequent instances of verbal and physical altercations at school and gang involvement. She described members of the gang as members of her family. In a double-sided reflection, the social worker tried to identify the conflicting factors that make consistent decision making difficult. The social worker responded, "Rhonda, it sounds as if part of you is doing your best to succeed in school and act as a responsible parent and plan for the future. Another part of you is conflicted about wanting to be true to your friends and, as you describe them, family members, who are members of the gang."

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

At a later point in the video "How Can I Help?," Julie is commenting on how she is torn about returning to school to get a GED, seeing both advantages and disadvantages. She says, "I don't know, I guess it would be a good accomplishment, but I just, I don't know, I just don't think, I don't just think I can do it, like, it's just hard. I don't know." The social worker, Peter, reflects the two sides of her feelings by saying, "So it's important to you on one hand, and then on the other hand, you don't feel confident in your ability to do it. Is that true?"

Reflections with a twist are reflections in which the social worker agrees in essence with the dilemma expressed by the client but changes the emphasis, perhaps to indicate that the dilemma is not unsolvable but rather that the client has not at this time solved it

(Miller & Rollnick, 2013). For example, in the previous situation with Rhonda, the social worker might add, "It sounds, Rhonda, as if at this point in time you don't feel that you can make a decision about what you are going to do about interacting with your friends in the gang."

These variations on reflections come from the **motivational interviewing (MI) approach** (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). They are useful in circumstances in which clients or potential clients are considering taking an action but have not decided on what to do. Rather than labeling such behavior as resistance, MI considers ambivalence as an important and useful step in deciding whether to address a situation. From the stages of change approach, such circumstances are described as being in a state of either **precontemplation**, in which a person has not decided whether an issue exists or whether they wish to address it, or **contemplation**, in which they are aware of an issue but have not decided whether to take action (De Clemente & Velasquez, 2002). These circumstances occur frequently in social work practice, but not always. Hence, the skills are presented here as important and useful adjuncts to reflection skills that can be applied when, in the course of exploration, potential ambivalence about considering an issue or taking action on it emerges. The spirit of MI is consistent with social work values of self-determination at this point in presenting the role of the helper as addressing ambivalence and helping the client consider whether he or she wishes to take action, without exerting pressure on that decision (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

Exercises with Reflections of Affect

In the following exercises, read each client/colleague statement and formulate written responses that reflect the affective state of clients. Modeled responses for these exercises appear at the end of the chapter (see pages 166–167).

Client/Colleague Statements

1. ***Client:*** Whenever I get into an argument with my mother, I always end up losing. I guess I'm still afraid of her.
2. ***Mother*** *[participating in a welfare-to-work program]:* I don't know how they can expect me to be a good mother and make school appointments, supervise my kids, and put in all these work hours.
3. ***Terminally ill cancer patient:*** Some days I am really angry because I'm only 46 years old and there are so many more things I wanted to do. Other days, I feel kind of defeated, like this is what I get for smoking two packs of cigarettes a day for 25 years.
4. ***Elementary school student:*** Kids pick on me at school. They are mean. If they try to hurt me, then I try to hurt them back.
5. ***Husband:*** I just can't decide what to do. If I go ahead with the divorce, I'll probably lose custody of the kids—and I won't be able to see them very much. If I don't, though, I'll have to put up with the same old thing. I don't think my wife is going to change.

CLOSED- AND OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

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Generally used to elicit specific information, **closed-ended questions** define a topic and restrict the client's response to a few words or a simple yes or no answer. Typical examples of closed-ended questions follow:

- *"When did you obtain your divorce?"*
- *"Do you have any sexual difficulties in your marriage?"*
- *"When did you last have a physical examination?"*
- *"Is your health insurance Medicare?"*

Although closed-ended questions restrict the client and elicit limited information, in many instances these responses are both appropriate and helpful. Later in this chapter, we discuss how and when to use this type of response effectively.

In contrast to closed-ended responses, which circumscribe client messages, **open-ended questions** and statements invite expanded expression and leave the client free to express what seems most relevant and important. For example:

Social worker: You've mentioned your daughter. Tell me how she enters into your problem.

Client: I don't know what to do. Sometimes I think she is just pushing me so that she can go live with her father. When I ask her to help around the house, she won't, and says that she doesn't owe me anything. When I try to insist on her helping, it just ends up in an ugly scene without anything being accomplished. It makes me feel so helpless.

In this example, the social worker's open-ended question prompted the client to expand on the details of the problems with her daughter, including a description of her daughter's behavior, her own efforts to cope, and her present sense of defeat. The information contained in the message is typical of the richness of data obtained through open-ended responding.

In circumstances like the example of a conversation with a managed care utilization reviewer noted earlier, the social worker can use an open-ended question to attempt to explore common ground that can lead to a mutually beneficial resolution:

Social worker *[to managed care utilization reviewer]:* Can you clarify for me how appropriate coverage is determined for situations such as the one I have described?

Some open-ended responses are unstructured, leaving the topic to the client's choosing (e.g., "Tell me what you would like to discuss today" or "What else can you tell me about the problems that you're experiencing?"). Other open-ended responses are structured such that the social worker defines the topic to be discussed but leaves the client free to respond in any way that he or she wishes (e.g., "You've mentioned feeling ashamed about the incident that occurred between you and your son. I'd be interested in hearing more about that."). Still other open-ended responses fall along a continuum between structured and unstructured, giving the client leeway to answer with a few words or to elaborate with more information (e.g., "How willing are you to do this?").

Social workers may formulate open-ended responses either by asking a question or by giving a polite command. Suppose a terminally ill cancer patient said, "The doctor thinks I could live about six or seven months now. It could be less; it could be more. It's just an educated guess, he told me." The social worker could respond by asking, "How are you feeling about that prognosis?" Polite commands have the same effect as direct questions in requesting information but are less forceful and involve greater finesse. Similar in nature are **embedded questions** that do not take the form of a question but embody a request for information. Examples of embedded questions include "I'm curious about …," "I'm wondering if …," and "I'm interested in knowing.…"

Open-ended questions often start with "What" or "How." "Why" questions are often unproductive because they may ask for reasons, motives, or causes that are obvious, obscure, or unknown to the client. Asking how ("How did that happen?") rather than why ("Why did that happen?") often elicits far richer information regarding client behavior and patterns.

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Home for the Holidays, Part 1," the social worker, Kim Strom-Gottfried, asks one partner about the experience of when she came out to her parents as a lesbian: "Let me ask a bit about the coming out conversation. Sounds like it was not an easy one, yet one you were able to have. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?"

Exercises in Identifying Closed- and Open-Ended Responses

The following exercises will assist you in differentiating between closed- and open-ended messages. Identify each statement with either a C for a closed-ended question or an O for an open-ended question. Turn to the end of the chapter (page 167) to check your answers.

1. "Did your mother ask you to see me because of the problem you had with the principal?"
2. "When John says that to you, what do you experience inside?"
3. "You said you're feeling fed up and you're just not sure that pursuing a reconciliation is worth your trouble. Could you elaborate?"
4. "When is your court date?"

Now read the following client statements and respond by writing open-ended responses to them. Avoid using *why* questions. Examples of open-ended responses to these messages appear at the end of the chapter (see page 167).

Client Statements

1. ***Client:*** Whenever I'm in a group with Ralph, I find myself saying something that will let him know that I am smart, too.
2. ***Client:*** I have always had my parents call for me about appointments and other things I might mess up.
3. ***Teenager*** *[speaking of a previous probation counselor]:* He sure let me down. And I really

trusted him. He knows a lot about me because I spilled my guts.

4. ***Group nursing home administrator:*** I think that we are going to have to move Gladys to another, more suitable kind of living arrangement. We aren't able to provide the kind of care that she needs.

The next sections of this chapter explain how you can blend open-ended and reflective responses to keep a discussion focused on a specific topic. In preparation for that, respond to the next two client messages by formulating a reflection followed by an open-ended question that encourages the client to elaborate on the same topic.

5. ***Unwed teenage girl seeking abortion*** *[brought in by her mother, who wishes to discuss birth alternatives]:* I feel like you are all tied up with my mother, trying to talk me out of what I have decided to do.
6. ***Client:*** Life is such a hassle, and it doesn't seem to have any meaning or make sense. I just don't know whether I want to try figuring it out any longer.

The difference between closed-ended and open-ended responses may seem obvious to you, particularly if you completed the preceding exercises. It has been our experience, however, that social workers have difficulty in actual sessions in determining whether their responses are open-ended or closed-ended, in observing the differential effect of these two types of responses in yielding rich and relevant data, and in deciding which of the two types of responses is appropriate at a given moment. We recommend, therefore, that as you converse with your associates, you practice drawing them out by employing open-ended responses and noting how they respond. We also recommend that you use the form provided at the end of the chapter (see page 167) to assess both the frequency and the appropriateness of your closed- and open-ended responses in several taped client sessions.

Discriminant Use of Closed- and Open-Ended Responses

Beginning social workers typically ask an excessive number of closed-ended questions, many of which block communication or are inefficient or irrelevant to the helping process. When this occurs, the session tends to take on the flavor of an interrogation, with the social worker bombarding the client with questions and taking responsibility for maintaining verbalization. Notice what happens in the following excerpt from a recording of a social worker interviewing an institutionalized youth:

Social worker: I met your mother yesterday. Did she come all the way from Colorado to see you?
Client: Yeah.
Social worker: It seems to me that she must really care about you to take the bus and make the trip up here to see you. Don't you think so?
Client: I suppose so.
Social worker: Did the visit with her go all right?
Client: Fine. We had a good time.
Social worker: You had said you were going to talk to her about a possible home visit. Did you do that?
Client: Yes.

When closed-ended responses are used to elicit information in lieu of open-ended responses, as in the preceding example, many more discrete interchanges will occur. However, the client's responses will be brief and the information yield will be markedly lower.

Open-ended responses often elicit the same data as closed-ended questions but draw out much more information and elaboration of the problem from the client. The following two examples contrast open-ended and closed-ended responses that address the same topic with a given client. To appreciate the differences in the richness of information yielded by these contrasting responses, compare the likely client responses elicited by such questions to the closed-ended questions used in the previous section.

Example 1

Closed-ended: "Did she come all the way from Colorado to see you?"
Open-ended: "Tell me about your visit with your mother."

Example 2

Closed-ended: "Did you talk with her about a possible home visit?"
Open-ended: "How did your mother respond when you talked about a possible home visit?"

Because open-ended responses elicit more information than closed-ended ones, frequent use of the former technique increases the efficiency of data gathering.

In fact, the richness of information revealed by the client is directly proportional to the frequency with which open-ended responses are employed. Frequent use of open-ended responses also fosters a smoothly flowing session; consistently asking closed-ended questions, by contrast, may result in a fragmented, discontinuous process.

Closed-ended questions are used chiefly to elicit essential factual information. Skillful social workers use closed-ended questions sparingly, because clients usually reveal extensive factual information spontaneously as they unfold their stories, aided by the social worker's open-ended and furthering responses. Although they are typically employed little during the first part of a session, closed questions are used more extensively later to elicit data that clients may have omitted, such as names and ages of children, place of employment, date of marriage, medical facts, and data regarding family of origin.

In obtaining these kinds of factual data, the social worker can unobtrusively weave into the discussion closed-ended questions that directly pertain to the topic. For example, a client may relate certain marital problems that have existed for many years, and the social worker might ask parenthetically, "And you've been married for how many years?" Similarly, a parent may explain that a child began to have irregular attendance at school when the parent started to work 6 months ago, to which the social worker might respond, "I see. Incidentally, what type of work do you do?" It is vital, of course, to shift the focus back to the problem. If necessary, the social worker can easily maintain focus by using an open-ended response to pick up the thread of the discussion. For example, the social worker might comment, "You mentioned that Ernie began missing school when you started to work. I'd like to hear more about what was happening in your family at that time."

Because open-ended responses generally yield rich information, they are used throughout initial sessions. They are used most heavily, however, in the first portion of sessions to open up lines of communication and to invite clients to reveal problematic aspects of their lives. The following open-ended polite command is a typical opening message: "Could you tell me what you wish to discuss, and we can think about it together." Such responses convey interest in clients as well as respect for clients' abilities to relate their problems in their own way; as a consequence, they also contribute to the development of a working relationship.

As clients disclose certain problem areas, open-ended responses are extensively employed to elicit additional relevant information. Clients, for example, may reveal difficulties at work or in relationships with other family members. Open-ended responses like the following will elicit clarifying information:

- *"Tell me more about your problems at work."*
- *"I'd like to hear more about the circumstances when you were mugged coming home with the groceries."*

Open-ended responses can be used to enhance communication with collaterals, colleagues, and other professionals as well. For example, Strom-Gottfried (1998a) suggests using effective communication skills in negotiation and communication between care providers and utilization reviewers. When a client has not been approved for a kind of service that the social worker has recommended, the social worker can attempt to join with the reviewer in identifying goals that both parties would embrace and request information in an open-ended fashion:

> *I appreciate your concern that she gets the best available services and that her condition does not get worse. We are concerned with safety, as we know you are. Could you tell me more about how this protocol can help us assure her safety?* (Strom-Gottfried, 1998a, p. 398)

It may sometimes be necessary to employ closed-ended questions extensively to draw out information if the client is unresponsive and withholds information or has limited conceptual and mental abilities. However, in the former case, it is vital to explore the client's immediate feelings about being in the session, which often are negative and impede verbal expression. Focusing on and resolving negative feelings (discussed at length in Chapter 17) may pave the way to using open-ended responses to good advantage.

When you incorporate open-ended responses into your repertoire, you will experience a dramatic positive change in your interviewing style and confidence level. To assist you to develop skill in blending and balancing open-ended and closed-ended responses, we have provided a recording form to help you examine your own interviewing style (see Figure 6-1). Using this form, analyze several recorded individual, conjoint, or group sessions over a period of time to determine changes you are making in employing these two types of responses. The recording form will assist you in determining the extent to which you have used open- and closed-ended responses.

SOCIAL WORKER'S RESPONSES	OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES	CLOSED-ENDED RESPONSES
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		

Directions: Record your discrete open- and closed-ended responses and place a check in the appropriate column. Agency time constraints will dictate how often you can practice it.

FIG 6-1 Recording Form for Open- and Closed-Ended Responding Seeking Concreteness

In addition, you may wish to review your work for the following purposes:

1. To determine when relevant data are missing and whether the information might have been more appropriately obtained through an open- or closed-ended response
2. To determine when your use of closed-ended questions was irrelevant or ineffective, or distracted from the data-gathering process
3. To practice formulating open-ended responses you might use instead of closed-ended responses, to increase client participation and elicit richer data

SEEKING CONCRETENESS

Many of us are inclined to think and talk in generalities and to use words that lack precision when speaking of our experiences ("How was your weekend?" "It was awesome.") To communicate one's feelings and experiences so that they are fully understood, however, a person must be able to respond concretely—that is, with specificity. **Responding concretely** means using words that describe in explicit terms specific experiences, behaviors, and feelings. As an example, in the following message, an intern supervisor provides feedback in vague and general terms: "I thought you had a good interview." Alternatively, he might have described his experience in more precise language: "During your interview, I was impressed with the way you blended open-ended with closed-ended questions in a relaxed fashion."

You should consider seeking concreteness when the client uses language that suggests to you that you may not understand their terms in the way they intend. This can be particularly true when interviewing children or adolescents whose colloquial expressions may not be entirely clear to the interviewer. Similarly, nonnative speakers may be conveying ideas that do not readily translate into the language you are speaking. In summary, seeking concreteness can be useful to:

1. Check out perceptions
2. Clarify the meaning of vague or unfamiliar terms
3. Explore the basis of conclusions drawn by clients
4. Assist clients in personalizing their statements
5. Elicit specific feelings
6. Focus on the here and now rather than on the distant past
7. Elicit details related to clients' experiences

8. Elicit details related to interactional behavior
9. Clarify details of timelines, expectations

To test your comprehension of the concept of concreteness, assess which of the following messages give descriptive information concerning what a client experiences:

1. "I have had a couple of accidents that would not have happened if I had full control of my hands. The results weren't that serious, but they could be."
2. "I'm uneasy right now because I don't know what to expect from counseling, and I'm afraid you might think that I really don't need it."
3. "You are a good girl, Susie."
4. "People don't seem to care whether other people have problems."
5. "My last social worker did not answer my calls."
6. "I really wonder if I'll be able to keep from crying and to find the words to tell my husband that it's all over—that I want a divorce."
7. "You did a good job."

You could probably readily identify which messages contained language that increased the specificity of the information conveyed by the client.

In developing competency as a social worker, one of your challenges is to consistently recognize clients' messages expressed in abstract and general terms and to assist them to reveal highly specific information related to feelings and experiences. Such information will assist you to make accurate assessments and, in turn, to plan interventions accordingly. A second challenge is to help clients learn how to respond more concretely in their relationships with others—a task you will not be able to accomplish unless you can model the dimension of concreteness yourself. A third challenge is to describe your own experience in language that is precise and descriptive. It is not enough to recognize concrete messages; in addition, you must familiarize yourself with and practice responding concretely to the extent that it becomes a natural style of speaking and relating to others.

The remainder of our discussion on the skill of seeking concreteness is devoted to assisting you in meeting these three challenges.

Types of Responses That Facilitate Specificity of Expression by Clients

Social workers who fail to move beyond general and abstract messages often have little grasp of the specificity and meaning of a client's problem. Eliciting highly specific information that minimizes errors or misinterpretations, however, represents a formidable challenge. People typically present impressions, views, conclusions, and opinions that, despite efforts to be objective, are inevitably biased and distorted to some extent. As previously mentioned, it is common for many of us to speak in generalities and to respond with imprecise language. As a consequence, those messages may be understood differently by different people.

To help you conceptualize the various ways you may assist clients to respond more concretely, the following sections examine different facets of responses that seek concreteness. In addition to discussing these aspects, this section includes 10 skill development exercises designed to bring your comprehension of concreteness from the general and abstract to the specific and concrete.

Checking Out Perceptions

Responses that help social workers clarify and "check out" whether they have accurately heard clients' messages (e.g., "Do you mean …" or "Are you saying …") are vital in building rapport with clients and in communicating the desire to understand their problems. Such responses also minimize misperceptions or projections in the helping process. Clients benefit from social workers' efforts to understand, because clarifying responses assist clients in sharpening and reformulating their thinking about their own feelings and other concerns, thereby encouraging self-awareness and growth.

Sometimes, perception checking becomes necessary because clients' messages are incomplete, ambiguous, or complex. Occasionally, social workers may encounter clients who repeatedly communicate in highly abstract or metaphorical styles, or clients whose thinking is scattered and whose messages just do not "track" or make sense. In such instances, social workers must spend considerable time sorting through clients' messages and clarifying perceptions.

At other times, the need for clarification arises not because the client has conveyed confusing, faulty, or incomplete messages, but rather because the social worker has not fully attended to the client's message or comprehended its meaning. Fully attending throughout each moment of a session requires intense concentration. Of course, it is impossible to fully focus on and comprehend the essence of every message delivered in group and family meetings, where myriad transactions occur and competing communications bid for the social worker's attention.

It is important that you develop skill in using clarifying responses to elicit ongoing feedback regarding your perceptions and to acknowledge freely your need for clarification when you are confused or uncertain. Rather than reflecting personal or professional inadequacy, your efforts to accurately grasp the client's meaning and feelings will most likely be perceived as signs of your genuineness and your commitment to understand.

To check your perceptions, try asking simple questions that seek clarification or try combining your request for clarification with a paraphrase or empathic response that reflects your perception of the client's message (e.g., "I think you were saying ___. Is that right?"). Examples of clarifying messages include the following:

- "You seem to be really irritated, not only because he didn't respond when you asked him to help but because he seemed to be deliberately trying to hurt you. Is that accurate?"
- "I'm not sure I'm following you. Let me see if I understand the order of events you described …"
- "Would you expand on what you're saying so I can be sure I understand what you mean?"
- "Could you go over that again and perhaps give an illustration that might help me understand?"
- "I'm confused. Let me try to restate what I think you're saying."
- "As a group, you seem to be divided in your approach to this matter. I'd like to summarize what I'm hearing, and I would then appreciate some input regarding whether I understand the various positions that have been expressed."

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Serving the Squeaky Wheel," the social worker, Ron Rooney, asks Molly, a client with a diagnosed serious and persistent mental illness (SPMI) the following question to verify his perception: "So you feel that other people's ideas about what mental illness means are not the same as yours?"

In addition to clarifying their own perceptions, social workers need to assist clients in conjoint or group sessions to clarify their perceptions of the messages of others who are present. This may be accomplished in any of the following ways:

- By modeling clarifying responses, which occur naturally as social workers seek to check out their own perceptions of clients' messages.
- By directing clients to ask for clarification. Consider, for example, the following response by a social worker in a conjoint session:

  [To the mother of the daughter who had just spoken]: "You had a confused look on your face, and I'm not sure that you understood your daughter's point. Would you repeat back to her what you heard and then ask her if you understood correctly?"

- By teaching clients how to clarify perceptions and by reinforcing their efforts to "check out" the messages of others, as illustrated in the following responses:

  [To group]: "One of the reasons families have communication problems is that members don't hear accurately what others are trying to say and, therefore, often respond or react on the basis of incorrect or inadequate information. I would like to encourage all of you to frequently use what I call 'checking out' responses, such as 'I'm not sure what you meant. Were you saying …?' to clarify statements of others. As we go along, I'll point out instances in which I notice any of you using this kind of response."

  [To family]: "I'm wondering if you all noticed Jim 'checking out' what his dad said. As you may recall, we talked about the importance of these kinds of responses earlier.

  [To father]: I'm wondering, Bob, what you experienced when Jim did that?"

Clarifying the Meaning of Vague or Unfamiliar Terms

In expressing themselves, clients often employ terms that have multiple meanings or use terms in idiosyncratic ways. For example, in the message "The kids in this school are mean," the word *mean* may have different meanings to the social worker and the client. If the social worker does not identify what this term means to a particular client, he or she cannot be certain whether the client is referring to behavior that is violent, unfriendly, threatening, or something else. The precise

meaning can be clarified by employing one of the following responses:

- "Tell me about the way that some kids are mean in this school."
- "I'm not sure I know what is happening when you say that some kids act in a mean way. Could you clarify that for me?"
- "Can you give me an example of something mean that has happened at this school?"

Many other words also lack precision, so it is important to avoid assuming that the client means the same thing you mean when you use a given term. For example, "codependent," "irresponsible," "selfish," and "careless" conjure up meanings that vary according to the reference points of different persons. Exact meanings are best determined by asking for clarification or for examples of events in which the behavior alluded to actually occurred.

Exploring the Basis of Conclusions Drawn by Clients

Clients often present views or conclusions as though they are established facts. For example, the messages "I'm losing my mind" and "My partner doesn't love me anymore" include views or conclusions that the client has drawn. To accurately assess the client's difficulties, the social worker must elicit the information on which these views or conclusions are based. This information helps the social worker assess the thinking patterns of the client, which are powerful determinants of emotions and behavior. For example, a person who believes he or she is no longer loved will behave as though this belief represents reality. The social worker's role, of course, is to reveal distortions and to challenge erroneous conclusions in a facilitative manner.

The following responses would elicit clarification of the information that serves as the basis of the views and conclusions embodied in the messages cited earlier:

- *"How have you concluded that you're losing your mind?"*
- *"What leads you to believe your partner no longer loves you?"*

Note that entire groups may hold in common fixed beliefs that may not be helpful to them in attempting to better their situations. In such instances, the social worker faces the challenging task of assisting members to reflect upon and to analyze their views. For example, the social worker may need to help group members assess conclusions or distortions like the following:

- *"We can't do anything about our problems. We are helpless and others are in control of our lives."*
- *"People in authority are out to get us."*
- *"Someone else is responsible for our problems."*
- *"They (members of another race, religion, group, etc.) are no good."*

In Chapter 13, we discuss the social worker's role in challenging distortions and erroneous conclusions and identify relevant techniques that may be used for this purpose.

Assisting Clients in Personalizing Their Statements

The relative concreteness of a specific client message is related in part to the focus or subject of that message. Client messages fall into several different classes of topic focus (Cormier, Nurius, & Osborn, 2009), each of which emphasizes different information and leads into very different areas of discussion:

- Focus on self, indicated by the subject *I* (e.g., *"I'm disappointed that I wasn't able to keep the appointment."*)
- Focus on others, indicated by subjects such as *they*, *people*, *someone*, or names of specific persons (e.g., *"They haven't fulfilled their part of the bargain."*)
- Focus on the group or mutual relationship between self and others, indicated by the subject *we* (e.g., *"We would like to do that."*)
- Focus on content, indicated by such subjects as events, institutions, situations, ideas (e.g., *"School wasn't easy for me."*)

People are more prone to focus on others or on content, or to speak of themselves as a part of a group, rather than to personalize their statements by using "I" or other self-referent pronouns. This tendency is illustrated in the following messages: "Things just don't seem to be going right for me," "They don't like me," and "It's not easy for people to talk about their problems." In the last example, the client means that it is not easy for *her* to talk about *her* problems, yet she uses the term *people*, thereby generalizing the problem and obscuring her personal struggle.

In assisting clients in personalizing statements, social workers have a three-part task:

1. Social workers must model, teach, and coach clients to use self-referent pronouns (*I*, *me*) in talking about their concerns and their own emotional response to those concerns. For example, in response to a vague client message that focuses on content rather than self ("Everything at home seems to be deteriorating"), the social worker might gently ask the client to reframe the message by starting the response with "I" and giving specific information about what she is experiencing. It is also helpful to teach clients the difference between messages that focus on self ("I think …" "I feel …," "I want …") and messages that are *other-related* ("It …," "Someone …")
2. Social workers must teach the difference between self-referent messages and subject-related messages (those dealing with objects, things, ideas, or situations). Although teaching clients to use self-referent pronouns when talking about their concerns is a substantive task, clients derive major benefits from it. Indeed, not owning or taking responsibility for feelings and speaking about problems in generalities and abstractions are among the most prevalent causes of problems in communicating.
3. Social workers must focus frequently on the client and use the client's name or the pronoun *you*. Beginning social workers are apt to respond passively to client talk about other people, distant situations, the group at large, various escapades, or other events or content that give little information about self and the relationship between self and situations or people. A more active response is to request that the client be more specific about his or her concerns in the present situation related to the issues raised. In the following illustration, the social worker's response focuses on the situation rather than on the client:

Client: My kids want to shut me up in a nursing home.
Social worker: What makes you think that?

In contrast, the following message personalizes the client's concern and explicitly identifies the feelings she is experiencing:

Social worker: You worry that your children might be considering a nursing home for you. You want to be part of any decision about what would be a safe environment for you.

A social worker may employ various techniques to assist clients in personalizing messages. In the preceding example, the social worker used an empathic response. In this instance, this skill is invaluable to the social worker in helping the client to focus on self. Recall that personalizing feelings is an inherent aspect of the paradigm for responding empathetically ("You feel _____ about _____ because _____"). Thus, clients can make statements that omit self-referent pronouns, and by utilizing empathic responding, social workers may assist clients to "own" their feelings.

Eliciting Specific Feelings

Even when clients personalize their messages and express their feelings, social workers often need to elicit additional information to clarify what they are experiencing, because certain "feeling words" denote general feeling states rather than specific feelings. For example, in the message, "I'm really upset that I didn't get a raise," the word *upset* helps to clarify the client's general frame of mind but fails to specify the precise feeling. In this instance, *upset* may refer to feeling disappointed, discouraged, unappreciated, devalued, angry, resentful, or even incompetent or inadequate because of failing to receive a raise. Until the social worker has elicited additional information, he or she cannot be sure of how the client actually experiences being "upset."

Other feeling words that lack specificity include *frustrated*, *uneasy*, *uncomfortable*, *troubled*, and *bothered*. When clients employ such words, you can pinpoint their feelings by using responses such as the following:

- "How do you mean, 'upset'?"
- "I'd like to understand more about that feeling. Could you clarify what you mean by 'frustrated'?"
- "Can you say more about in what way you feel 'bothered'?"

Focusing on the Here and Now

Another aspect of concreteness takes the form of responses that shift the focus from the past to the present, the here and now. Messages that relate to the immediate present are high in concreteness, whereas those that center on the past are low in concreteness. Many of us are prone to dwell on past feelings and events.

Unfortunately, precious opportunities for promoting growth and understanding may slip through the fingers of social workers who fail to focus on emotions and experiences that unfold in the immediacy of the interview. Focusing on feelings as they occur will enable you to observe reactions and behavior firsthand, eliminating any bias and error caused by reporting feelings and experiences after the fact. Furthermore, the helpfulness of your feedback is greatly enhanced when this feedback relates to the client's immediate experience.

The following exchange demonstrates how to achieve concreteness in such situations:

Client *[choking up]:* When she told me it was all over, that she was in love with another man—well, I just felt—it's happened again. I felt totally alone, like there just wasn't anyone.

Social worker: That must have been terribly painful. *[Client nods; tears well up.]* I wonder if you're not having the same feeling just now—at this moment. *[Client nods in agreement.]*

Not only do such instances provide direct access to the client's inner experience, but they also may produce lasting benefits as the client shares deep and painful emotions in the context of a warm, accepting, and supportive relationship. Here-and-now experiencing that involves emotions toward the social worker (e.g., anger, hurt, disappointment, affectional desires, fears) is known as **relational immediacy**. Skills pertinent to relational immediacy warrant separate consideration and are dealt with in Chapter 18.

Focusing on here-and-now experiencing with groups, couples, and families is a particularly potent technique for assisting members of these systems to clear the air of pent-up feelings. Moreover, interventions that focus on the immediacy of feelings bring buried issues to the surface, paving the way for the social worker to assist members of these systems to clearly identify and explore their difficulties and (if appropriate) to engage in problem solving.

Eliciting Details Related to Clients' Experiences

As previously mentioned, one reason why concrete responses are essential is that clients often offer up vague statements regarding their experiences—for example, "Some people in this group don't want to change bad enough to put forth any effort." Compare this with the following concrete statement, in which the client assumes ownership of the problem and fills in details that clarify its nature:

Client: I'm concerned because I want to do something to work on my problems in this group, but when I do try to talk about them, you, John, make some sarcastic remark. It seems that then several of you *[gives names]* just laugh about it and someone changes the subject. I really feel ignored then and just go off into my own world.

Aside from assisting clients to personalize their messages and to "own" their feelings and problems, social workers must ask questions that elicit illuminating information concerning the client's experiencing, such as that illustrated in the preceding message. Questions that start with "how" or "what" are often helpful in assisting the client to give concrete data. For example, to the client message, "Some people in this group don't want to change bad enough to put forth any effort," the social worker might respond, "What have you seen happening in the group that leads you to this conclusion?"

Eliciting Details Related to Interactional Behavior

Concrete responses are also vital in accurately assessing **interactional behavior**. Such responses pinpoint what actually occurs in interactional sequences—that is, what circumstances preceded the events, what the participants said and did, what specific thoughts and feelings the client experienced, and what consequences followed the event. In other words, the social worker elicits details of what happened, rather than settling for clients' views and conclusions. The following is an example of a concrete response to a client message:

High school student: My teacher really lost it yesterday. She totally dissed me, and I hadn't done one thing to deserve it.

Social worker: That must have been aggravating. Can you describe for me the sequence of events—what led up to this situation, and what each of you said and did? To understand better what went wrong, I'd like to get the details as though I had been there and observed what happened.

In such cases, it is important to keep clients on topic by continuing to assist them to relate the events in question, using responses such as "Then what happened?," "What did you do next?," or "Then who said what?" If dysfunctional patterns become evident after

exploring numerous events, social workers have a responsibility to share their observations with clients, to assist them to evaluate the effects of the patterned behavior, and to assess their motivation to change it.

Specificity of Expression by Social Workers

Seeking concreteness applies to the communication of both clients and social workers. In this role, you will frequently explain, clarify, and give feedback to clients. As a social worker who has recently begun a formal professional educational program, you may be prone to speak with the vagueness and generality that characterize much of the communication of the lay public. When such vagueness occurs, clients and others may understandably misinterpret, draw erroneous conclusions, or experience confusion about the meaning of your messages.

Consider the lack of specificity in the following messages actually delivered by social workers:

- *"You seem to have a lot of pent-up hostility."*
- *"You really handled yourself well in the group today."*
- *"I think a lot of your difficulties stem from your self-image."*

Vague terms such as *hostility*, *handled yourself well*, and *self-image* may leave the client in a quandary as to what the social worker actually means. Moreover, in this style of communication, conclusions are presented without supporting information. As a result, the client must accept them at face value, reject them as invalid, or speculate on the basis of the conclusions. Fortunately, some people are sufficiently perceptive, inquisitive, and assertive to request greater specificity—but many others are not.

Contrast the preceding messages with how the social worker responds to the same situations with messages that have a high degree of specificity:

- "I've noticed that you've become easily angered and frustrated several times as we've talked about ways you might work out child custody arrangements with your wife. This appears to be a very painful area for you."
- "I noticed that you responded several times in the group tonight, and I thought you offered some very helpful insight to Marjorie when you said _____. I also noticed you seemed to be more at ease than in previous sessions."
- "We've talked about your tendency to feel inferior to other members of your family and to discount your own feelings and opinions in your contacts with them. I think that observation applies to the problem you're having with your sister that you just described. You've said you didn't want to go on the trip with her and her husband because they fight all the time, yet you feel you have to go because she is putting pressure on you. As in other instances, you appear to be drawing the conclusion that how you feel about the matter isn't important."

When social workers speak with specificity, clarify meanings, personalize statements, and document the sources of their conclusions, clients are much less likely to misinterpret or project their own feelings or thoughts. Clients like to be clear about what is expected of them and how they are perceived, as well as how and why social workers think and feel as they do about matters discussed in their sessions. Clients also learn vicariously to speak with greater specificity as social workers model sending concrete messages.

Both beginning and experienced social workers face the additional challenge of avoiding inappropriate use of jargon. Unfortunately, jargon has pervaded professional discourse and runs rampant in social work literature and case records. Its use confuses, rather than clarifies, meanings for clients. The careless use of jargon with colleagues also fosters stereotypical thinking and is therefore antithetical to the cardinal value of individualizing the client. Furthermore, labels tend to conjure up images of clients that vary from one social worker to another, thereby injecting a significant source of error into communication. Consider the lack of specificity in the following messages that are rich in jargon:

- "Mrs. N manifests strong passive-aggressive tendencies."
- "Sean displayed adequate impulse control in the group and tested the leader's authority in a positive manner."
- "Hal needs assistance in gaining greater self-control."
- "The client shows some borderline characteristics."
- "The group members were able to respond to appropriate limits."
- "Ruth appears to be emotionally immature for an eighth-grader."

To accurately convey information about clients to your colleagues, you must explicitly describe their behavior and document the sources of your conclusions. For example, with the vague message, "Ruth appears to be emotionally immature for an eighth-grader," consider how much more accurately another social worker would perceive your client if you conveyed information in the form of a concrete response: "The teacher says Ruth is quiet and stays to herself in school. She doesn't answer any questions in class unless directly called upon, and she often doesn't complete her assignments. She spends considerable time daydreaming or playing with objects." By describing behavior in this way, you avoid biasing your colleague's perceptions of clients by conveying either vague impressions or erroneous conclusions.

It has been our experience that mastery of the skill of communicating with specificity is gained only through extended and determined effort. The task becomes more complicated if you are not aware that your communication is vague. We recommend that you carefully and consistently monitor your recorded sessions and your everyday conversations with a view toward identifying instances in which you did or did not communicate with specificity. This kind of monitoring will enable you to set relevant goals for yourself and to chart your progress. We also recommend that you enlist your practicum instructor to provide feedback about your performance level on this vital skill.

Exercises in Seeking Concreteness

In the following exercises, read each client statement and then formulate a written response that will elicit concrete data regarding the client's problems. You may wish to combine your responses with either an empathic response or a paraphrase. Review the eight guidelines for seeking concreteness as you complete the exercise to help you develop effective responses and conceptualize the various dimensions of this skill. After you have finished the exercises, compare your responses with the modeled responses at the end of the chapter (see page 167).

Client Statements

1. ***Adolescent*** *[speaking of his recent recommitment to a correctional institution]:* It really seems weird to be back here.
2. ***Client:*** You can't depend on friends; they'll stab you in the back every time.
3. ***Client:*** He's got a terrible temper—that's the way he is, and he'll never change.
4. ***Client:*** My supervisor is so insensitive, you can't believe it. All she thinks about are reports and deadlines.
5. ***Client:*** I was upset after I left your office last week. I felt you really didn't understand what I was saying and didn't care how I felt.
6. ***Client:*** My dad's 58 years old now, but I swear he still hasn't grown up. He always has a chip on his shoulder.
7. ***Senior client:*** My rheumatoid arthritis has affected my hands a lot. It gets to be kind of tricky when I'm handling pots and pans in the kitchen.
8. ***Client:*** I just have this uneasy feeling about going to the doctor. I guess I've really got a hang-up about it.
9. ***African American student*** *[to African American social worker]:* You ask why I don't talk to my teacher about why I'm late for school. I'll tell you why. Because she's white, that's why. She's got it in for us black students, and there's just no point talking to her. That's just the way it is.
10. ***Client:*** John doesn't give a damn about me. I could die, and he wouldn't lose a wink of sleep.

PROVIDING AND MAINTAINING FOCUSING

EP 6

Skills in focusing are critical to your practice for several reasons. Because your time with clients is limited, it is critical to make the best use of each session by honing in on key topics. You are also responsible for guiding the helping process and avoiding wandering. Unlike normal social relations, helping relationships should be characterized by purposeful focus and continuity. As social workers, we perform a valuable role by assisting clients to focus on their problems in greater depth and to maintain focus until they accomplish desired changes.

In addition, families and groups sometimes experience interactional difficulties that prevent them from focusing effectively on their problems. To enhance family and group functioning, social workers must be able to refocus the discussion whenever dysfunctional interactional processes cause families and groups to prematurely drift away from the topic at hand.

To assist you in learning how to focus effectively, we consider the three functions of focusing skills:

1. Selecting topics for exploration
2. Exploring topics in depth
3. Managing obstacles to focusing

Knowledge of these functions will enable you to focus sharply on relevant topics and elicit sufficient data to formulate an accurate problem assessment—a prerequisite for competent practice.

Selecting Topics for Exploration

Areas relevant for exploration vary from situation to situation. However, clients who have contact with social workers in the same setting, such as in nursing homes, group homes, or child welfare agencies, may share many common concerns.


EP 7

Before meeting with clients whose concerns differ from client populations with which you are familiar, you can prepare yourself to conduct an effective exploration by developing (in consultation with your practicum instructor or field supervisor) a list of relevant and promising problem areas to be explored. This preparation will help you avoid a mistake commonly made by some beginning social workers—namely, focusing on areas irrelevant to clients' problems and eliciting reams of information of questionable utility.

In your initial interview with an institutionalized youth, for example, you could more effectively select questions and responses if you knew in advance that you might explore the following areas:

1. Client's own perceptions of the concerns at hand
2. Client's perceived strengths and resources
3. Reasons for being institutionalized and brief history of past problems related to legal authority and to use of drugs and alcohol
4. Details regarding the client's relationships with individual family members, both as concerns and sources of support
5. Brief family history
6. School adjustment, including information about grades, problem subjects, areas of interest, and relationships with various teachers
7. Adjustment to institutional life, including relationships with peers and supervisors
8. Peer relationships outside the institution
9. Life goals and short-term goals
10. Reaction to previous experiences with helpers
11. Attitude toward engaging in a working relationship to address concerns

Because the institutionalized youth is an involuntary client, part of this exploration would include the youth's understanding of which parts of his or her work are nonnegotiable requirements and which parts could be negotiated or free choices (R. H. Rooney, 2009).

Similarly, if you plan to interview a self-referred middle-aged woman whose major complaint is depression, the following topical areas could assist you in conducting an initial interview:

1. Concerns as she sees them, including the nature of depressive symptoms such as sleep patterns and appetite changes
2. Client's perceived strengths and resources
3. Hopes and vision for a better future without depression
4. Health status, date of last physical examination, and medications being taken
5. Onset and duration of depression, previous depressive or manic episodes
6. Life events associated with onset of depression (especially losses)
7. Exceptions when depression has not occurred or occurred less frequently
8. Possible suicidal thoughts, intentions, or plans
9. Problematic thought patterns (e.g., self-devaluation, self-recrimination, guilt, worthlessness, helplessness, hopelessness)
10. Previous coping efforts, previous treatment
11. Quality of interpersonal relationships (e.g., interpersonal skills and deficiencies, conflicts and supports in marital and parent–child relationships)
12. Reactions of significant others to her depression
13. Support systems (adequacy and availability)
14. Daily activities
15. Sense of mastery versus feelings of inadequacy
16. Family history of depression or manic behavior

Because she is self-referred, this client is likely to be more voluntary than the institutionalized youth. You should therefore pay more attention to identifying the specific concerns that have led her to seek help at this point in time.

As noted previously, problem areas vary, and outlines of probable topical areas likewise vary accordingly. Thus, a list of areas for exploration in an initial

session with a couple seeking marriage counseling or with a group of alcoholics will include a number of items that differ from those in the first list (the areas identified for the institutionalized youth). Note that questions should tap into hopes, resources, exceptions, and skills as much as concerns and problems.

In using an outline, you should avoid following it rigidly or using it as a crutch; otherwise, you could potentially destroy the spontaneity of sessions and block clients from relating their stories in their own way. Instead, encourage your clients to discuss their problems freely while you play a facilitative role in exploring in greater depth any problems that emerge. In particular, you must use outlines flexibly—reordering the sequence of topics; modifying, adding, or deleting topics; or abandoning the outline altogether if using it hinders communication. You need to be alert to pacing related to appropriate depth and breadth, given the time available.

Of course, you cannot always anticipate fruitful topical areas. After all, although clients from the same population may share many commonalities, their problems inevitably have unique aspects. For this reason, it is important to review tapes of sessions with your practicum instructor or a field supervisor for the purpose of identifying other topical areas you should explore in future sessions.

Exploring Topics in Depth

A major facet of focusing is centering discussions on relevant topics to assure that exploration moves from generality and superficiality to greater depth and meaning. Social workers must have the skills needed to explore problems thoroughly, because their success in the helping process depends on their ability to obtain clear and accurate definitions of problems.

Selectively attending to specific topics is challenging for beginning social workers, who often wander in individual or group sessions, repeatedly skipping across the surface of vital areas of content and feelings, eliciting largely superficial and sometimes distorted information. This tendency is illustrated in the following excerpt from a first session with an adolescent in a school setting:

Social worker: Tell me about your family.
Client: My father is ill and my mother is dead, so we live with my sister.
Social worker: How are things with you and your sister?
Client: Good. We get along fine. She treats me pretty good.
Social worker: How about your father?
Client: We get along pretty well. We have our problems, but most of the time things are okay. I don't really see him very much.
Social worker: Tell me about school. How are you getting along here?
Client: Well, I don't like it very well, but my grades are good enough to get me by.
Social worker: I notice you're new to our school this year. How did you do in the last school you attended?

By focusing superficially on the topics of family and school, this social worker misses opportunities to explore potential problem areas in the depth necessary to illuminate the client's situation. Not surprisingly, this exploration yielded little information of value, in large part because the social worker failed to employ responses that focused in depth on topical areas. In the next sections, we further delineate the skills that will considerably enhance a social worker's ability to maintain focus on specific areas.

Open-Ended Responses

As we discussed earlier, social workers may employ open-ended responses throughout individual, conjoint, and group sessions to focus unobtrusively on desired topics. Earlier we noted that some open-ended responses leave clients free to choose their own topics, whereas others focus on a topic but encourage clients to respond freely to that topic. The following examples, taken from an initial session with a mother of eight children who has depression, illustrate how social workers can employ open-ended responses to define topical areas that may yield a rich trove of information vital to grasping the dynamics of the client's problems.

- *"What have you thought that you might like to accomplish in our work together?"*
- *"You've discussed many topics in the last few minutes. Could you pick the most important one and tell me more about it?"*
- *"You've mentioned that your oldest son doesn't come home after school as he did before and help you with the younger children. I would like to hear more about that."*
- *"Several times as you've mentioned your concern that your husband may leave you, your voice has trembled. I wonder if you could share what you are feeling."*

- *"You've indicated that your partner doesn't help you enough with the children. You also seem to be saying that you feel overwhelmed and inadequate in managing the children by yourself. Tell me what happens as you try to manage your children."*
- *"You indicate that you have more problems with your 14-year-old daughter than with the other children. Tell me more about Janet and your problems with her."*

In the preceding examples, the social worker's open-ended questions and responses progressively moved the exploration from the general to the specific. Note also that each response or question defined a new topic for exploration. To encourage in-depth exploration of the topics defined in this way, the social worker must blend open-ended questions with other facilitative verbal following responses that focus on and elicit expanded client expressions. After having defined a topical area by employing an open-ended response, for instance, the social worker might deepen the exploration by weaving other open-ended responses into the discussion. If the open-ended responses shift the focus to another area, however, the exploration suffers a setback. Note in the following exchange how the social worker's second open-ended response shifts the focus away from the client's message, which involves expression of intense feelings:

Social worker: You've said you're worried about retiring. I'd appreciate you sharing more about your concern. *[Open-ended response.]*

Client: I can't imagine not going to work every day. I feel at loose ends already, and I haven't even quit work. I'm afraid I just won't know what to do with myself.

Social worker: How do you imagine spending your time after retiring? *[Open-ended response.]*

Even though open-ended responses may draw out new information about clients' problems, they may not facilitate the helping process if they prematurely lead the client in a different direction. If social workers utilize open-ended or other types of responses that frequently change the topic, they will obtain information that is disjointed and fragmented. As a result, assessments will suffer from large gaps in the social worker's knowledge concerning clients' problems. As social workers formulate open-ended responses, they must be acutely aware of the direction that responses will take.

Seeking Concreteness

Earlier we discussed and illustrated the various facets of seeking concreteness. Because seeking concreteness enables social workers to move from the general to the specific and to explore topics in depth, it is a key focusing technique. We illustrate this ability in an excerpt from a session involving a client with a serious and persistent mental illness:

Client: I just don't have energy to do anything. This medicine really knocks me out.

Social worker: It sounds as if the side effects of your medication are of concern. Can you tell me specifically what those side effects have been?

By focusing in depth on topical areas, social workers are able to discern—and to assist clients in discerning—problematic thoughts, behavior, and interaction. Subsequent sections consider how social workers can effectively focus on topical areas in exploratory sessions by blending concreteness with other focusing skills. In actuality, the majority of responses that social workers typically employ to establish and maintain focus are blends of various types of discrete responses.

Empathic Responding

As noted earlier, empathic responding serves a critical function by enabling social workers to focus in depth on troubling feelings, as illustrated in the next example:

Client: I can't imagine not going to work every day. I feel at loose ends already, and I haven't even quit work. I'm afraid I just won't know what to do with myself.

Social worker: You seem to be saying, "Even now, I'm apprehensive about retiring. I'm giving up something that has been very important to me, and I don't seem to have anything to replace it." I gather that feeling at loose ends, as you do, you worry that when you retire, you'll feel useless.

Client: I guess that's a large part of my problem. Sometimes I feel useless now. I just didn't take time over the years to develop any hobbies or to pursue any interests. I guess I don't think that I can do anything else.

Social worker: It sounds as if part of you feels hopeless about the future, as if you have done everything you can do. And yet I wonder if another part of you might think that it isn't too late to look into some new interests.

Client: I do dread moping around home with time on my hands. I can just see it now. My wife will want to keep me busy doing things around the house for her all the time. I've never liked to do that kind of thing. I suppose it is never too late to look into other interests. I have always wanted to write some things for fun, not just for work. You know, the memory goes at my age, but I have thought about just writing down some of the family stories.

Note how the client's problem continued to unfold as the social worker utilized empathic responding, revealing rich information in the process. The social worker also raises the possibility of new solutions, not just dwelling in the feelings of uselessness.

Blending Open-Ended, Empathic, and Concrete Responses to Maintain Focus

After employing open-ended responses to focus on a selected topic, social workers should use other responses to maintain focus on that topic. In the following excerpt, observe how the social worker employs both open-ended and empathic responses to explore problems in depth, thereby enabling the client to move to the heart of her struggle. Notice also the richness of the client's responses elicited by the blended messages.

Social worker: As you were speaking about your son, I sensed some pain and reluctance on your part to talk about him. I'd like to understand more about what you're feeling. Could you share with me how it is for you to be talking about him? *[Blended empathic and open-ended response that seeks concreteness.]*

Client: I guess I haven't felt too good about coming this morning. I almost called and canceled. I feel I should be able to handle these problems with Jim [son] myself. Coming here is like having to admit I'm no longer capable of coping with him.

Social worker: So you've had reservations about coming *[reflection]*—you feel you're admitting defeat and that perhaps you've failed or that you're inadequate—and that hurts. *[Empathic response.]*

Client: Well, yes, although I know that I need some help. It's just hard to admit it, I think. My biggest problem in this regard, however, is my husband. He feels much more strongly than I do that we should manage this problem ourselves, and he really disapproves of my coming in.

Social worker: So even though it's painful for you, you're convinced you need some assistance with Jim, but you're torn about coming here because of your husband's attitude. I'd be interested in hearing more about that. *[Blended empathic and open-ended response.]*

In the preceding example, the social worker initiated discussion of the client's here-and-now experiences through a blended open-ended and empathic response, following it with other empathic and blended responses to explore the client's feelings further. With the last response, the social worker narrowed the focus to a potential obstacle to the helping process (the husband's attitude toward therapy), which could also be explored in a similar manner.

Open-ended and empathic responses may also be blended to facilitate and encourage discussion from group members about a defined topic. For instance, after using an open-ended response to solicit group feedback regarding a specified topic ("I'm wondering how you feel about …"), the social worker can employ empathic or other facilitative responses to acknowledge the contribution of members who respond to the invitation to comment. By utilizing open-ended responses, the social worker can also successively reach for comments of individual members who have not contributed ("What do you think about …, Ray?").

In the next example, the social worker blends empathic and concrete responses to facilitate in-depth exploration. Notice how these blended responses bring out specific behavioral descriptions of the problem. The empathic messages convey the social worker's sensitive awareness and concern for the client's distress. The open-ended and concrete responses focus on details of a recent event and yield valuable clues that the client's rejections by women may be associated with insensitive and inappropriate social behavior. Awareness of this behavior is a prelude to formulating relevant goals. Goals formulated in this way are highly relevant to the client.

Single male client, age 20: There has to be something wrong with me, or women wouldn't treat me like a leper. Sometimes I feel like I'm doomed to be alone the rest of my life. I'm not even sure why I came to see you. I think I'm beyond help.

Social worker: You sound like you've given up on yourself—as though you're utterly hopeless. At the same time, it seems like part of you still clings to hope and wants to try. *[Empathic response.]*

Client: What else can I do? I can't go on like this, but I don't know how many more times I can get knocked down and get back up.

Social worker: I sense you feel deeply hurt and discouraged at those times. Could you give me a recent example of when you felt you were being knocked down? *[Blended empathic and concrete response.]*

Client: Well, a guy I work with got me a blind date for a dance. I took her, and it was a total disaster. I figured that she would at least let me take her home. After we got to the dance, she ignored me the whole night and danced with other guys. Then, to add insult to injury, she went home with one of them and didn't even have the decency to tell me. There I was, wondering what had happened to her.

Social worker: Besides feeling rejected, you must have been very mad. When did you first feel you weren't hitting it off with her? *[Blended empathic and concrete response.]*

Client: I guess it was when she lit up a cigarette while we were driving to the dance. I kidded her about how she was asking for lung cancer.

Social worker: I see. What was it about her reaction, then, that led you to believe you might not be in her good graces? *[Concrete response.]*

Client: Well, she didn't say anything. She just smoked her cigarette. I guess I really knew then that she was upset at me.

Social worker: As you look back at it now, what do you think you might have said to repair things at that point? *[Stimulating reflection about problem solving.]*

In the next example, observe how the social worker blends empathic and concrete responses to elicit details of interaction in an initial conjoint session. Such blending is a potent technique for eliciting specific and abundant information that bears directly on clients' problems. Responses that seek concreteness elicit details. In contrast, empathic responses enable social workers to stay attuned to clients' moment-by-moment experiencing, thereby focusing on feelings that may present obstacles to the exploration.

Social worker: You mentioned having difficulties communicating. I'd like you to give me an example of a time when you felt you weren't communicating effectively, and let's go through it step by step to see if we can understand more clearly what is happening.

Wife: Well, weekends are an example. Usually I want to go out and do something fun with the kids, but John just wants to stay home. He starts criticizing me for wanting to go, go, go.

Social worker: Could you give me a specific example? *[Seeking concreteness.]*

Wife: Okay. Last Saturday I wanted all of us to go out to eat and then to a movie, but John wanted to stay home and watch TV.

Social worker: Before we get into what John did, let's stay with you for a moment. There you are, really wanting to go to a movie—tell me exactly what you did. *[Seeking concreteness.]*

Wife: I think I said, "John, let's take the kids out to dinner and a movie."

Social worker: Okay. That's what you said. How did you say it? *[Seeking concreteness.]*

Wife: I expected him to say no, so I might not have said it the way I just did.

Social worker: Turn to John, and say it the way you may have said it then. *[Seeking concreteness.]*

Wife: Okay. *[Turning to husband.]* Couldn't we go out to a movie?

Social worker: There seems to be some doubt in your voice as to whether John wants to go out. *[Focusing observation.]*

Wife *[interrupting]:* I knew he wouldn't want to.

Social worker: So you assumed he wouldn't want to go. It's as though you already knew the answer. *[To husband]:* Does the way your wife asked the question check out with the way you remembered it? *[Husband nods.]*

Social worker: After your wife asked you about going to the movie, what did you do? *[Seeking concreteness.]*

Husband: I said, nope! I wanted to stay home and relax Saturday, and I felt we could do things at home.

Social worker: So your answer was short. Apparently you didn't give her information about why you didn't want to go but just said no. Is that right? *[Focusing observation.]*

Husband: That's right. I didn't think she wanted to go anyway—the way she asked.

Social worker: What were you experiencing when you said no? *[Seeking concreteness.]*

Husband: I guess I was just really tired. I have a lot of pressures from work, and I just need some time to relax. She doesn't understand that.

Social worker: You're saying, then, "I just needed some time to get away from it all," but I take it you had your doubts as to whether she could appreciate your feelings. *[Husband nods.] [Turning to wife.]*

Now, after your husband said no, what did you do? *[Blended empathic and concrete response.]*

Wife: I think that I started talking to him about the way he just sits around the house.

Social worker: I sense that you felt hurt and somewhat discounted because John didn't respond the way you would have liked. *[Empathic response.]*

Wife *[nods]:* I didn't think he even cared what I wanted to do.

Social worker: Is it fair to conclude, then, that the way in which you handled your feelings was to criticize John rather than to say, "This is what is happening to me?" *[Wife nods.] [Seeking concreteness.]*

Social worker *[to husband]:* Back, then, to our example. What did you do when your wife criticized you? *[Seeking concreteness.]*

Husband: I guess I criticized her back. I told her she needed to stay home once in a while and get some work done.

In this series of exchanges, the social worker asked questions that enabled the couple to describe the sequence of their interaction in a way that elicited key details and provided insight into unspoken assumptions and messages.

Managing Obstacles to Focusing

EP 6

Occasionally you may find that your efforts to focus selectively and to explore topical areas in depth do not yield pertinent information. Although you have a responsibility in such instances to assess the effectiveness of your own interviewing style, you should also analyze clients' styles of communicating to determine to what extent their behaviors are interfering with your focusing efforts. Many clients seek help because they have—but are not aware of—patterns of communicating or behaviors that create difficulties in relationships. In addition, involuntary clients who do not yet perceive the relationship as helping may be inclined to avoid focusing. The following list highlights common types of client communications that may challenge your efforts to focus in individual, family, and group sessions:

- Responding with "I don't know"
- Changing the subject or avoiding sensitive areas
- Rambling from topic to topic
- Intellectualizing or using abstract or general terms
- Diverting focus from the present to the past
- Responding to questions with questions
- Interrupting excessively
- Failing to express opinions when asked
- Producing excessive verbal output
- Using humor or sarcasm to evade topics or issues
- Verbally dominating the discussion

You can easily see how individuals who did not seek help from a social worker and want to avoid focusing might use these kinds of methods to protect their privacy. With such involuntary clients, such behaviors are likely to indicate a low level of trust and a skepticism that contact with a social worker can be helpful. You can counter repetitive behaviors and communications that divert the focus from exploring problems by tactfully drawing them to clients' attention and by assisting clients in adopting behaviors that are compatible with their goals for work together. In groups, social workers must assist group members to modify behaviors that repeatedly disrupt effective focusing and communication; otherwise, the groups will not move to the phase of group development in which most of the work related to solving problems is accomplished. Children as clients often respond at first contact in a limited, passive, nonexpressive style. This might be interpreted as noncommunicative behavior. In fact, such behavior is often what children expect to be appropriate in interactions with strange authority figures (Evans, 2004; Hersen & Thomas, 2007; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Powell, Thomson, & Dietze, 1997).

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Hanging with Hailey," the adolescent client, Hailey, is apprehensive about having to see a social worker and insists that she has done nothing wrong. The social worker, Emily, clarifies that Hailey can choose whether she wants to see a social worker, that she has not done anything wrong, but that teachers who knew her to be a good student have become concerned that something might have changed in her life to affect her school performance. By emphasizing her choice, Emily is able to allow Hailey to relax enough to share some of what is going on in her life currently.

Social workers may use many different techniques for managing and modifying client obstacles. These

techniques include asking clients to communicate or behave differently; teaching, modeling for, and coaching clients to assume more effective communication styles; reinforcing facilitative responses; and selectively attending to functional behaviors.

Intervening to Help Clients Focus or Refocus in Group or Conjoint Sessions

Communications that occur in group or conjoint sessions are not only complex but may also be distractive or irrelevant. Consequently, the social worker's task of assisting members to explore the defined topics fully, rather than meander from subject to subject, is a challenging one. Related techniques that social workers can employ include highlighting or clarifying issues and bringing clients' attention to a comment or matter that has been overlooked. In such instances, the objective is not necessarily to explore the topic (although an exploration may subsequently occur) but rather to stress or elucidate important content. The social worker focuses clients' attention on communications or events that occurred earlier in the session or immediately preceded the social worker's focusing response. This technique is used in the following messages:

- *[To son in session with parents]:* "Ray, you made an important point a moment ago that I'm not sure your parents heard. Would you please repeat your comment?"
- *[To individual]:* "I would like to return to a remark made several moments ago when you said _____. I didn't want to interrupt then. I think perhaps the remark was important enough that we should return to it now."
- *[To family]:* "Something happened just a minute ago as we were talking. *[Describes event.]* We were involved in another discussion then, but I made a mental note of it because of how deeply it seemed to affect all of you at the time. I think we should consider what happened for just a moment."
- *[To group member]:* "John, as you were talking a moment ago, I wasn't sure what you meant by _____. Could you clarify that for me and for others in the group?"
- *[To group]:* "A few minutes ago, we were engrossed in a discussion about _____, yet we have moved away from that discussion to one that doesn't really seem to relate to our purpose for being here. I'm concerned about leaving the other subject hanging because you were working hard to find some solutions and appeared to be close to a breakthrough."

Because of the complexity of communications in group and family sessions, some inefficiency in the focusing process is inescapable. Nevertheless, the social worker can sharpen the group's efforts to focus and encourage more efficient use of its time by teaching effective focusing behavior. We suggest that social workers actually explain the focusing role of the group and identify desirable focusing behaviors, such as attending, active listening, and asking open-ended questions. During this discussion, it is important to emphasize that by utilizing these skills, members will facilitate exploration of problems.

Social workers can encourage greater use of these skills by giving positive feedback to group or family members when they have adequately focused on a problem, thus reinforcing their efforts. Indeed, given the difficulties in encouraging some clients to speak even minimally, some social workers can be so relieved to have a verbal client that they neglect the focusing skills that make the session most valuable and useful to the client. Although group members usually experience some difficulty in learning how to focus, they should be able to delve deeply into problems by the third or fourth session, given sufficient guidance and education by social workers. Such efforts by social workers tend to accelerate movement of groups toward maturity, a phase in which members achieve maximum therapeutic benefits. A characteristic of a group in this phase, in fact, is that members explore issues in considerable depth rather than skim the surface of many topics.

SUMMARIZING RESPONSES

The technique of **summarization** embodies four distinct yet related facets:

1. Highlighting key aspects of discussions of specific problems, strengths, and resources before changing the focus of the discussion
2. Making connections between relevant aspects of lengthy client messages
3. Reviewing major focal points of a session and tasks that clients plan to work on before the next session
4. Recapitulating the highlights of a previous session and reviewing clients' progress on tasks during the week for the purpose of providing focus and continuity between sessions

Although employed at different times and in different ways, each of these facets of summarization serves the common purpose of tying together functionally related elements that occur at different points in the helping process. They are considered in detail in the following sections.

Highlighting Key Aspects of Problems, Strengths, and Resources

During the phase of an initial session in which problems and resources are explored in moderate depth, summarization can be effectively employed to tie together and highlight essential aspects before proceeding to explore additional concerns and strengths. For example, the social worker might describe how the problem appears to be produced by the interplay of several factors, including external pressures, overt behavioral patterns, unfulfilled needs and wants, and covert thoughts and feelings. Connecting these key elements assists clients in gaining a more accurate and complete perspective of their circumstances.

Employed in this fashion, summarization involves fitting pieces of the problem together to form a coherent whole. Those concerns can also be matched with a summary of values and current and potential resources and strengths identified. Seeing the situation in a fresh and more accurate perspective often proves beneficial because it expands clients' awareness and can generate hope and enthusiasm for tackling an issue that has hitherto seemed insurmountable.

Summarization that highlights problems and resources is generally employed at a natural point in the session when the social worker believes that relevant aspects have been adequately explored and clients appear satisfied in having had the opportunity to express their concerns. The following example illustrates this type of summarization. In this case, the client, an 80-year-old widow, has been referred to a Services to Seniors program for exploration of alternative living arrangements because of her failing health, isolation, and recent falls. As the social worker and client have worked together to explore alternative living arrangements, the pair has identified several characteristics that would be important for the client in an improved living situation. Highlighting the salient factors, the social worker summarizes the results to this point:

Social worker: It sounds as if you are looking for a situation in which there is social interaction, but your privacy is also important to you. You want to maintain your independence. You also want to have someone available to help in emergencies and some assistance with cooking and cleaning.

Summarizing responses of this type serve as a prelude to the process of formulating goals, as goals flow naturally from problem formulations. Moreover, highlighting various dimensions of the problem facilitates the subsequent identifications of subgoals and tasks that must be accomplished to achieve the overall goal. In the preceding example, to explore an improved living situation, the social worker would help the client analyze the specific form of privacy (whether living alone or with someone else) and the type of social interaction (how much and what kind of contact with others) she desires.

Summarizing salient aspects of problems and resources is also a valuable technique in sessions with groups, couples, and families. It enables the social worker to stop at timely moments and highlight the difficulties experienced by each participant. In a family session with a pregnant adolescent and her mother, for example, the social worker might make the following statements:

- *[To pregnant adolescent]:* "You feel as if deciding what to do about this baby is your decision—it's your body, and you have decided that an abortion is the best solution for you. You know that you have the legal right to make this decision and want to be supported in making it. You see your mother as a potential resource and know that your mother wants to help. You value your independence in decision making and know that she can't tell you what decision to make."
- *[To mother]:* "As you spoke, you seemed saddened and very anxious about this decision your daughter is making. You are saying, 'I care about my daughter, but I don't think she is mature enough to make this decision on her own.' As you have noted, women in your family have had a hard time conceiving, and you wish that she would consider other options besides abortion. So you feel a responsibility to your daughter, but also to this unborn baby and the family history of conceiving children."

Such responses synthesize in concise and neutral language the needs, concerns, and problems of each participant for all other members of the session to hear. This type of summarization underscores the

fact that all participants are struggling with and have responsibility for problems that are occurring, thus counteracting the tendency of families to view one person as the exclusive cause of family problems.

Summarizing Lengthy Messages

Clients' messages range from one word or one sentence to lengthy and sometimes rambling monologues. Although the meaning and significance of brief messages are often readily discernible, lengthy messages challenge the social worker to encapsulate and tie together diverse and complex elements. Linking the elements together often highlights and expands the significance and meaning of the client's message. For this reason, such messages represent one form of additive empathy, a skill discussed in Chapter 17.

Because lengthy client messages typically include emotions, thoughts, and descriptive content, you will need to determine how these dimensions relate to the focal point of the discussion. To illustrate, consider the following message of a mildly brain-damaged and socially withdrawn 16-year-old female—an only child who is extremely dependent on her overprotective but subtly rejecting mother:

Client: Mother tells me she loves me, but I find that hard to believe. Nothing I do ever pleases her; she yells at me when I refuse to wash my hair alone. But I can't do it right without her help. "When are you going to grow up?" she'll say. And she goes out with her friends and leaves me alone in that old house. She knows how scared I get when I have to stay home alone. But she says, "Nancy, I can't just babysit you all the time. I've got to do something for myself. Why don't you make some friends or watch TV or play your guitar? You've just got to quit pitying yourself all the time." Does that sound like someone who loves you? I get so mad at her when she yells at me; it's all I can do to keep from killing her.

Embodied in the client's message are the following elements:

1. Wanting to be loved by her mother yet feeling insecure and rejected at times
2. Feeling inadequate about performing certain tasks, such as washing her hair
3. Feeling extremely dependent on her mother for certain services and companionship
4. Feeling afraid when her mother leaves her alone
5. Feeling hurt (implied) and resentful when her mother criticizes her or leaves her alone
6. Feeling intense anger and wanting to lash out when her mother yells at her

The following summarizing response ties these elements together:

Social worker: So you find your feelings toward your mother pulling you in different directions. You want her to love you, but you feel unloved and resent it when she criticizes you or leaves you alone. And you feel really torn because you depend on her in so many ways. Yet at times, you feel so angry you want to hurt her back for yelling at you. You'd like to have a smoother relationship without the strain.

Occasionally, client messages may ramble to the extent that they contain numerous unrelated elements that cannot all be tied together. In such instances, your task is to extract and focus on those elements of the message that are most relevant to the thrust of the session at that point. When employed in this manner, summarization provides focus and direction to the session and averts aimless wandering. With clients whose thinking is loose or who ramble to avoid having to focus on unpleasant matters, you may need to interrupt to assure some semblance of focus and continuity. Otherwise, the interview will be disjointed and unproductive. Skills in maintaining focus and continuity are discussed in more depth in Chapter 13.

Reviewing Focal Points of a Session

During the course of an individual, conjoint, or group session, it is common to focus on more than one problem and to discuss numerous factors associated with each problem. Toward the end of the first or second session, depending on the length of the initial exploration, summarization is employed to review key concerns that have been discussed and to highlight themes and patterns related to these problems. Summarizing themes, patterns, and resources expands each client's awareness of concerns and tunes them in to promising avenues for addressing those concerns, awareness of opportunities, and potential resources. Through summarizing responses, social workers can not only review themes, patterns, and resources that have emerged in their sessions but also test clients'

readiness to consider goals aimed at modifying these problematic patterns.

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Getting Back to Shakopee," Dorothy, the social worker, summarizes: "You have had a lot of stress at work with a poor performance review and anxiety that your coworkers are being rude to you over the possibility that you might get promoted. At home, you are dealing with your mother, who is living with you; your son and his girlfriend not working outside of the home and their baby; your daughter who helps take care of the little ones. All of the work of keeping up the household comes back to you. You are not eating, not sleeping very well, and have lost interest in some things you used to like to do. You have also been considered for promotion at work in the past and care deeply for those family members living with and relying on you."

In conjoint interviews or group sessions, summarization can also be used effectively to highlight and to tie together key elements and dynamics embodied in transactions, as illustrated in the following video case.

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Home for the Holidays, Part 1," lesbian partners who come to family treatment are in conflict about how open to be about their relationship to their families. Jackie comes from a family in which there is open communication. She is frustrated with the reticence to deal openly with feelings that is reflected in Anna's family. Kim, the social worker, makes the following summarizing statement: "Often when we are forming new families and new couples, we are torn between the families we come from and the new family we are creating. This can play out in logistical decisions about the holidays."

Providing Focus and Continuity

Social workers can also use summarization at the beginning of an individual, group, or conjoint session to review work that clients have accomplished in the last session(s) and to set the stage for work in the present session. At the same time, the social worker may decide to identify a promising topic for discussion or to refresh clients' minds concerning work they wish to accomplish in that session. In addition, summarization can be employed periodically to synthesize salient points at the conclusion of a discussion or used at the end of the session to review the major focal points. In so doing, the social worker will need to place what was accomplished in the session within the broad perspective of the clients' goals. The social worker tries to consider how the salient content and movement manifested in each session fit into the larger whole. Only then are the social worker and clients likely to maintain a sense of direction and avoid needless delays caused by wandering and detours—problems that commonly occur when continuity within or between sessions is weak.

Used as a "wrap-up" when the allotted time for a session is nearly gone, summarization assists the social worker to draw a session to a natural conclusion. In addition to highlighting and linking together the key points of the session, the social worker reviews clients' plans for performing tasks before the next session. When the session ends with such a summarization, all participants should be clear about where they have been and where they are going in relation to the goals toward which their mutual efforts are directed.

Analyzing Your Verbal Following Skills

After taking frequency counts over a period of time of some of the major verbal following skills (accent responses, reflections, responses that seek concreteness, open- and closed-ended responses, and so on), you are ready to assess the extent to which you employ, blend, and balance these skills in relation to each other. On the form for recording verbal following (Figure 6-2), categorize each of your responses from a recorded session. As you analyze your relative use and blending of responses alone or with your practicum instructor, determine whether certain types of responses were used either too frequently or too sparingly. Think of steps you might take to correct any imbalances in your utilization of skills for future sessions.

CLIENT MESSAGE	OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES	CLOSED-ENDED RESPONSES	EMPATHIC RESPONSES	LEVEL OF EMPATHY	CONCRETE RESPONSES	SUMMARIZING RESPONSES	OTHER TYPES OF RESPONSES
1.							
2.							
3.							
4.							
5.							
6.							
7.							

Directions: Categorize each of your responses from a recorded session. Where responses involve more than one category (blended responses), record them as a single response, but also check each category embodied in the response. Excluding the responses checked as "Other Type of Responses," analyze whether certain types of responses were utilized too frequently or too sparingly. Define tasks for yourself to correct imbalances in future sessions. Retain a copy of the form so that you can monitor your progress in mastering verbal following skills over an extended period of time.

FIG 6-2 Recording Form for Verbal Following Skills

SUMMARY

This chapter has helped you learn how to explore, reflect, and appropriately use closed- and open-ended responses as means to better focusing, following, and summarizing in your social work practice. These skills may be applied both with clients and with other persons and colleagues on behalf of clients. In Chapter 7, we will explore some common difficulties experienced by beginning social workers and some ways to overcome them.

COMPETENCY NOTES

EP 2 Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice

- Apply and communicate understanding of the importance of diversity and difference in shaping life experiences in practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.
- Present oneself as a learner, and engage clients and constituencies as experts on their own experiences.
- Apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies.

EP 6 Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

- Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks to engage with clients and constituencies.
- Use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills to effectively engage diverse clients and constituencies.

EP 7 Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

- Collect and organize data, and apply critical thinking to interpret information from clients and constituencies.

MODELED SOCIAL WORKER

Responses to Exercises in Reflection of Content

1. "You just get so uptight in a group you don't function."
2. "So you've made some real progress in tuning in to your husband and children."
3. "So people's helpfulness here and your own skills in meeting people have helped your adjustment here."
4. "So you see yourself as having contributed to many of her problems."
5. "It sounds as if your experience causes you to doubt whether more services would be helpful. Could you tell me about your conclusion that the mother is not motivated?"

MODELED SOCIAL WORKER

Responses to Exercises with Reflection of Affect

1. "Because your fears really block you when you argue with your mother, you seem to feel anxious and frustrated." [simple reflection]
2. "So you feel caught by competing parenting and work responsibilities; if you meet all your work hours, you are concerned about how it affects your parenting. If you do what you think you should as a parent, it can conflict with work requirements." [double-sided reflection]
3. "So sometimes you feel cheated by life, and at other times that your illness is a consequence for your smoking history." [double-sided reflection]
4. "So it sounds as if it has not been easy for you to relax and have friends in this school; when they have acted in a way that feels mean to you, you have felt a need to act to protect yourself." [simple reflection]
5. "You're really torn and wonder if not seeing the children very often is too high a price to pay for a divorce. On the other hand, you fear that if you stay with her, there won't be any improvement. Right now you don't see a way out of this dilemma." [reflection with a twist]

ANSWERS TO EXERCISES IN

Identifying Closed- and Open-Ended Responses

Statement	Response
1	C
2	O
3	O
4	C

MODELED SOCIAL WORKER

Responses to Exercises in Identifying Closed- and Open-Ended Responses

1. "Could you tell me more about your wanting to impress Ralph?"
2. "What are you afraid you'd do wrong?"
3. "Given your experience with that probation officer, how would you like your relationship with me to be?"
4. "So you feel that your facility cannot provide what Gladys needs. Can you describe the kind of care you believe she needs?"
5. "So you don't trust that I want to try to help you make what you feel will be the best decision. Can you tell me what I have done that has caused you to think that your mother and I are allies?"
6. "You sound as if you are at a pretty hopeless point right now. When you say you don't know if you want to keep trying to figure it out, can you tell me more about what you are thinking about doing?"

MODELED SOCIAL WORKER

Responses to Exercises in Seeking Concreteness

1. "Can you tell me how it feels weird to you?"
2. "I gather you feel that your friends have let you down in the past. Could you give me a recent example in which this has happened?"
3. "Could you tell me more about what happens when he loses his temper with you?" or "You sound like you don't have much hope that he'll ever get control of his temper. How have you concluded he will never change?" *[A social worker might explore each aspect of the message separately.]*
4. "Could you give me some examples of how she is insensitive to you?"
5. "Sounds like you've been feeling hurt and disappointed over my reaction last week. I can sense you're struggling with those same feelings right now."
6. "It sounds as if you feel that your dad's way of communicating with you is unusual for someone his age. Could you recall some recent examples of times you've had difficulties with how he communicates with you?"
7. "It sounds as if the arthritis pain is aggravating and blocking what you normally do. When you say that handling the pots and pans is kind of tricky, can you tell me about recent examples of what has happened when you are cooking?"
8. "Think of going to the doctor just now. Let your feelings flow naturally. *[Pause.]* What goes on inside you—your thoughts and feelings?"
9. "So you see it as pretty hopeless. You feel pretty strongly about Ms. Wright. I'd be interested in hearing what's happened that has led you to the conclusion she's got it in for black students."
10. "So you feel as if you're nothing in his eyes. I'm wondering how you've reached that conclusion?"

NOTE

1. In previous editions we referred to reflections of content responses as *paraphrases* if they were being used to provide fresh words to restate the client's content message concisely.

3. ***Tearful female client who is a mother:*** When I was a teenager, I thought that when I was married and had my own children, I would never yell at them like my mother yelled at me. Yet here I am doing the same things with Sonny.

   Apparent feelings:
   Probable deeper feelings:

4. ***African American client in child welfare system:*** The system is against people like me. People think that we drink, beat our kids, lay up on welfare, and take drugs.

   Apparent feelings:
   Probable deeper feelings:

Exercises at the end of this chapter for formulating reciprocal empathic responses will also assist you in increasing your perceptiveness to feelings.

ACCURATELY CONVEYING EMPATHY


EP 6

Empathic responding is a fundamental yet complex skill that requires systematic practice and extensive effort to achieve competency. Skill in empathic communication has no limit or ceiling; rather, this skill is always in the process of "becoming." In listening to their taped sessions, even highly skilled professionals discover feelings they overlooked. Many social workers, however, do not fully utilize empathic responding. They fail to grasp the versatility of this skill and its potency in influencing clients and fostering growth in moment-by-moment transactions.

In fact, some social workers dismiss the need for training in empathic responding, mistakenly believing themselves to already be empathic in their contacts with clients. Few people are inherently helpful in the sense of relating naturally with high levels of empathy or any of the other core conditions. Although people achieve varying degrees of empathy, respect, and genuineness through their life experiences, attaining high levels of these skills requires rigorous training. Research scales that operationalize empathy conditions have been developed and validated in extensive research studies (Duan & Hill, 1996; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). These scales, which specify levels of empathy along a continuum ranging from high- to low-level skills, represented a major breakthrough not only in operationalizing essential social worker skills but also in establishing a relationship between these skills and successful outcomes in practice. The empathic communication scale has been employed to help students distinguish between high- and low-level empathic responses and has been used by peers and instructors in group training to assess levels of students' responses. Students then receive guidance in reformulating responses to bring them to higher levels.

The Carkhuff (1969) empathy scale, which consists of nine levels, has been widely used in training and research. Although we have found nine-point scales valuable as training aids, they have proven somewhat confusing to students, who often have difficulty in making such fine distinctions between levels. For this reason, we have adapted the nine-level scale described by Hammond, Hepworth, and Smith (1977) by collapsing it to the five-level scale presented here.

Empathic Communication Scale

Level 0: Lack of Empathic Responding

We created this level because we have observed that some contact lacks empathy or is in fact anti-empathic. There can be circumstances where the norm in the setting and/or the skill and the beliefs of the social worker are such that it is not assumed to be the purview of the helping professional to convey empathy or understanding. Indeed, it can be the practice to actively challenge client perceptions if those are considered invalid or antisocial. We do not condone such expression and organizational norms and consider them to be counterproductive. Our disapproval of such expression does not mean it does not exist, however. We discuss it here so that you will be aware of it and, if you witness it, reflect on what alternatives to such communication exist.

Unfortunately, Level 0 responses occur with some frequency in settings in which clients are involuntary, stigmatized, or considered deviant. Such responses may provoke client anger but pose few consequences for the social worker unless there are norms that clients must be treated respectfully in all circumstances. We share these responses here not for the purpose of modeling them but rather to alert you that if you see them occurring or find yourself participating in them, they signal problems with the social worker or the setting. Such responses could just be the product of a social worker having a bad day, but they may represent a standard of

practice that passes unnoticed. Consider the following example of a mother in the child welfare system who has recently completed a drug treatment program.

Client: I want to go into an aftercare treatment program near my home that is culturally sensitive and allows me to keep my job.

Level 0 response: You should not be thinking about what is convenient for *you* but rather what might ultimately benefit your child by your being a safe parent for her. Your thinking here is symptomatic of the problem of why your child is in custody, and your chances of regaining custody are limited.

This response does not convey empathy. It is actively judgmental and inappropriately confrontational. It is possible that the social worker might have valid reasons for wishing the client to consider a variety of options. However, making the judgmental statement only makes the circumstances worse and makes it unlikely that the client will consider the social worker's opinion. Social workers' frustration with clients who endanger others is understandable. Statements like the one above, however, greatly hinder further efforts to work with them in a collaborative fashion.

Level 1: Low Level of Empathic Responding

At Level 1, the social worker communicates limited awareness or understanding of the client's feelings; the social worker's responses are irrelevant and often abrasive, hindering rather than facilitating communication. Operating from a personal frame of reference, the social worker changes the subject, argues, gives advice prematurely, lectures, or uses other ineffective styles that block communication, often diverting clients from their problems and fragmenting the helping process. Furthermore, the social worker's nonverbal responses are not appropriate to the mood and content of the client's statement.

When social workers relate at this low level, clients often become confused or defensive. They may react by discussing superficialities, arguing, disagreeing, changing the subject, or withdrawing into silence. Thus, the client's energies are diverted from exploration and/or work on problems.

In the previous example, if the social worker were to respond to the client seeking a culturally sensitive treatment option near her home with "I see that you want to find a program near your home," that would be a Level 1 response. This response is minimally facilitative but at least avoids the judgmental statements of the previous example.

Here is another example to consider, with a number of Level 1 responses.

African American male client *[to child welfare worker]:* I don't trust you people. You do everything you can to keep me from getting back my son. I have done everything I am supposed to do, and you people always come up with something else.

Level 1 Responses:

- *"Just carry out the case plan and you are likely to succeed."* (Giving advice)
- *"Just think what would have happened if you had devoted more energy in the last year to carrying out your case plan: You would have been further along."* (Persuading with logical argument; negatively evaluating client's actions)
- *"How did you get along with your last social worker?"* (Changing the subject)
- *"Don't you think it will all work out in time?"* (Leading question, untimely reassurance)
- *"Why, that's kind of an exaggeration. If you just work along with me, before you know it things will be better."* (Reassuring, consoling, giving advice)

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

You can see two versions of the same situation in the video "Domestic Violence and the Probation Officer." In the first version, note the client's reaction to the social worker's Level 0 response. Note how the situation looks different when the social worker employs higher levels of empathy in the second version of the situation.

The preceding examples illustrate ineffective styles of communication used at this low level. Notice that messages reflect the social worker's own formulations concerning the client's problem; they do not capture the client's inner experiencing. Such responses stymie clients, blocking their flow of thought and producing negative feelings toward the social worker.

Level 2: Moderately Low Level of Empathic Responding

At Level 2, the social worker responds to the client's surface message but erroneously omits feelings or

factual aspects of the message. The social worker may also inappropriately qualify feelings (e.g., "somewhat," "a little bit," "kind of") or may inaccurately interpret feelings (e.g., "angry" for "hurt," "tense" for "scared"). Responses may also emanate from the social worker's own conceptual formulations, which may be diagnostically accurate but not empathically attuned to the client's expressions. Although Level 2 responses are only partially accurate, they do convey an effort to understand and, for this reason, do not completely block the client's communication or work on problems.

Consider the following Level 2 responses to the earlier example of the African American male client expressing his feelings about the child welfare system.

Level 2 Responses:

- *"You'll just have to be patient. I can see you're upset."* The word *upset* defines the client's feelings only vaguely, whereas feeling words such as *angry*, *furious*, and *discounted* more accurately reflect the client's inner experiencing.
- *"You feel angry because your case plan has not been more successful to date. Maybe you are expecting too much too soon; there is a lot of time yet."* The listener begins to accurately capture the client's feelings but then moves to an evaluative interpretation ("you expect too much too soon") and inappropriate reassurance.
- *"You aren't pleased with your progress so far?"* This response focuses on external, factual circumstances to the exclusion of the client's feelings or perceptions regarding the event in question.
- *"You feel like things aren't going too well."* This response contains no reference to the client's immediately apparent feelings. Beginning social workers often use the lead-in phrase "You feel like …" without noticing that, in employing it, they have not captured the client's feelings.
- *"You're disappointed because you haven't gotten your son back?"* This response, although partially accurate, fails to capture the client's anger and distrust of the system, wondering whether any of his efforts are likely to succeed.
- *"I can see you are angry and disappointed because your efforts haven't been more successful so far, but I think you may be expecting the system to work too quickly."* Although the message has a strong beginning, the empathic nature of the response is negated by the listener's explanation of the reason for the client's difficulties. This response represents a form of taking sides—that is, justifying the actions of the child welfare system by suggesting that too much is expected of it.

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Getting Back to Shakopee," the social worker, Dorothy, listens as her client provides an account of her uncomfortable relations with her coworkers. She summarizes and adds a Level 2 empathic comment: "So just that I understand what you are talking about, you were working on your own project and Mary came over and added hers to yours and asked you to finish it for her? What did that do for you?" The empathy is implied in the social worker's question, but it could have been more explicit. For example, Dorothy might have asked, "Did you feel disrespected by how she acted toward you?"

The preceding responses illustrate many of the common errors made by social workers in responding empathically to client messages. Although some part of the messages may be accurate or helpful, all the responses in some way ignore or subtract from what the client is experiencing.

Level 3: Interchangeable or Reciprocal Level of Empathic Responding

The social worker's verbal and nonverbal responses at Level 3 convey understanding and are essentially interchangeable with the client's obvious expressions, accurately reflecting factual aspects of the client's messages and surface feelings or state of being. Reciprocal responses do not appreciably add affect or reach beyond the surface feelings, nor do they subtract from the feeling and tone expressed.

Acknowledging the factual content of the client's message, although desirable, is not required; if included, this aspect of the message must be accurate. Level 3 responses facilitate further exploratory and problem-focused responses by the client. The beginning social worker does well in achieving skill in reciprocal empathic responding, which is an effective working level. Consider the following examples of Level 3 responses.

Level 3 Responses:

- *"You're really angry about the slow progress in your case and are wondering whether your efforts are likely to succeed."*
- *"I can tell you feel very let down and are asking yourself, 'Will I ever get my son back?'"*

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

The video "Serving the Squeaky Wheel" contains a lengthy exchange in which the client, Molly, expresses her suspicion about what is written about her in the social worker's case records. The social worker responds, "I am hearing that it is a real sore point with you about what I write and think and what goes into the records about you." This is a Level 3 response that deals directly with her concern.

Level 3 responses such as these express accurately the immediately apparent emotions in the client's message. The content of the responses is also accurate, but deeper feelings and meanings are not added. The second response above also illustrates a technique for conveying empathy that involves changing the reflection from the third to the first person, and speaking as if the social worker were the client.

Level 4: Moderately High Level of Empathic Responding

Responses at Level 4 are somewhat additive, accurately identifying the client's implicit underlying feelings and/or aspects of the problem. The social worker's response illuminates subtle or veiled facets of the client's message, enabling the client to get in touch with somewhat deeper feelings and unexplored meanings and purposes of behavior. Level 4 responses thus are aimed at enhancing self-awareness. Consider the following example of a Level 4 response.

Level 4 Response:

- *"You feel very frustrated with the lack of progress in getting your son back. You wonder whether there is any hope in working with a new worker and this system, which you feel hasn't been helping you."*

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Serving the Squeaky Wheel," the client, Molly, says that other people's conceptions of mental illness do not include her. The social worker responds, "Let me see if I understand what you are saying: Some people may think because you have a car and you speak up for yourself, that you are a very competent person who doesn't need any resources [Client: "There you go."] and if you ask for them [Client: "I am screwing the system."] that you are trying to take things that you are not entitled to. But your view is that you can have a car and speak up for yourself and still have other needs." This Level 4 response not only conveys immediately apparent feelings and content but also is noticeably additive in reflecting the client's deeper feelings. In this case, the client's immediate response—finishing the practitioner's sentences—indicates that the empathic response is perceived as accurate.

Level 5: High Level of Empathic Responding

Reflecting each emotional nuance and using voice and intensity of expressions finely attuned to the client's moment-by-moment experiencing, the social worker accurately responds to the full range and intensity of both surface and underlying feelings and meanings at Level 5. The social worker may connect current feelings and experiencing to previously expressed experiences or feelings, or may accurately identify implicit patterns, themes, or purposes. Responses may also identify implicit goals embodied in the client's message, which point out a promising direction for personal growth and pave the way for action. Responding empathically at this high level facilitates the client's exploration of feelings and problems in much greater breadth and depth than responding at lower levels. Conveying this level of empathy occurs rarely with inexperienced interviewers and only somewhat more often with highly experienced interviewers. It should be noted that conveying higher levels of empathy can also be a factor of the setting and expectations as well as social worker skill. The opportunity to respond at higher levels of empathy is more likely to occur near the end of an interview and with clients who have become more voluntary. As you consult your notes, with notations of key words, you can

sometimes convey an empathic summary near the end of a session that captures themes and emotions, both expressed and implied. Consider the following example of a Level 5 response.

Level 5 Response:
An example of a Level 5 response can be found in the following video case.

VIDEO CASE EXAMPLE

In the video "Serving the Squeaky Wheel," Molly, a client with serious and persistent mental illness, acts, as she puts it, as a "greasy wheel," always advocating for herself and acting assertively, as she has been trained to do in many education programs. And yet those skills act as a "two- or three-edged sword" in that sometimes she is punished for this assertiveness. Reflecting these themes and Molly's language, the social worker, Ron Rooney, says, "You just seem to be courageous in fighting battles, and you have learned some skills in assertiveness, and as you say, that can be a two-edged or three-edged sword. Sometimes your assertiveness gets you what you want and sometimes your assertiveness causes some people to look at you as the squeaky wheel that has squeaked too much."

Exercises in Discriminating Levels of Empathic Responding

The following exercises ask you to rate responses for their level of empathy and are designed to assist you in refining your ability to determine the helpfulness of responses. These exercises will prepare you for subsequent practice in formulating your own empathic messages. Three client statements are given, followed by several possible responses. Using the empathic scale, rate each response from Level 0 to Level 5. Rating messages will be less difficult if, using the list of affective words and phrases, you first identify the feelings contained in the client's message. After you have rated each response, compare your rating with those given at the end of the chapter (see page 137). Referring to the rating scale, analyze the responses you rated inaccurately, trying to pinpoint the reason for the authors' ratings. Additional exercises are available in the *Practice Behaviors Workbook*.

Client Statement

1. ***Single woman, age 80*** *[to social worker concerning her request to move to an independent living complex provided for ambulatory older persons]:* Goodness, the more I think of moving, the more scared I get. I have neighbors here who look after me, and I won't know a soul there. I'm afraid I'll be all alone.

Possible Responses

1. "It's pretty scary to you, leaving your neighbors and familiar surroundings. But there will be a lot of friendly people there and things to do. Besides, they fix one hot meal for you every day."
2. "Don't worry, you'll make friends in no time, and you'll wish you'd moved sooner."
3. "Did you sign those application papers I left with you a few days ago?"
4. "Just thinking about moving worries you because you'll be leaving your own neighborhood and friends. Even though your life would be much easier, you're unsure you'll be better off in other ways."
5. "So I gather in some ways you'd rather stay right where you are rather than gamble on a change."
6. "Lots of other people in the new apartments were just as scared as you before they moved, but I don't know a single one who's sorry now."
7. "It sounds as though you have some pretty mixed feelings about moving. Part of you wants to go because you could live more comfortably, but another part of you is afraid you'll feel alone and lost and wants to cling to people you know care about you."
8. "Are you saying we just ought to forget the whole thing?"

Client Statement

2. ***Male, age 16*** *[in weekly visit to social work probation officer]:* I don't see the sense in having to come here every (expletive) week. I haven't been in any trouble now since I went to court a month ago. You should know by now you can trust me.

Possible Responses

1. "A month isn't very long, you know. And how can I be sure you're staying out of trouble?"
2. "I gather you'd rather not have to see me. I can understand that, but the judge ordered it and

you'd be in trouble with him if you didn't meet the conditions of your probation."
3. "Has it been a month since you went to court? I didn't think that it had been that long."
4. "You'd prefer not coming here and feel you've earned my trust."
5. "Having to come here each week irritates you, and I gather you may be disappointed that I am encouraging you to follow the judge's order."
6. "Look, you got yourself into this mess so don't complain to me if you don't like it. Maybe you'd like to talk the judge into changing his mind."
7. "It irritates you to have to come here each week. You'd like to get me off your back."
8. "You're confused about why you have to come here and wish you didn't have to."

Client Statement

3. ***Group member*** *[in hesitant, quiet voice]:* It's really hard for me to say what I want to say in this group. When I do start to talk, I get tongue-tied, and my heart starts beating faster and faster. I feel like some of you are critical of me.

Possible Responses (By Group Members or Group Leader)

1. "Yeah, I feel that same way sometimes, too."
2. "It is frightening to you to try to share your feelings with the group. Sounds like you find yourself at a loss for words and wonder what others are thinking of you."
3. "I know you're timid, but I think it's important that you make more of an effort to talk in the group, just like you're doing now. It's actually one of the responsibilities of being a group member."
4. "You get scared when you try to talk in the group."
5. "I sense that you're probably feeling pretty tense and tied up inside right now as you talk about the fear you've had in expressing yourself."
6. "Although you've been frightened of exposing yourself, I gather there's a part of you that wants to overcome that fear and become more actively involved with the rest of the group."
7. "What makes you think we're critical of you? You come across as a bit self-conscious, but that's no big deal."
8. "You remind me of the way I felt the first time I was in a group. I was so scared, I just looked at the floor most of the time."
9. "I wonder if we've done anything that came across as being critical of you."

Client Statement

4. ***A homeless client who has been referred to a housing program*** *[when asked by the social worker about what led to his losing his job]:* Budget cuts, layoffs, and I did not have seniority.

Possible Responses

1. "How did you feel about that?"
2. "So several things, including budget cuts, layoffs, and low seniority, contributed to your losing your job and contributed to your homelessness."
3. "How long have you been homeless?"
4. "Don't you think you have some responsibility for losing your job?"

RESPONDING WITH RECIPROCAL EMPATHY

EP 6

Reciprocal or interchangeable empathic responding (Level 3) is a basic skill used throughout the helping process to acknowledge client messages and to encourage exploration of problems. In the initial phase, empathic responding serves a vital purpose in individual, conjoint, and group sessions: It facilitates the development of a working relationship and fosters the climate of understanding necessary to promote communication and self-disclosure. In this way, it sets the stage for deeper exploration of feelings during subsequent phases of the helping process.

Note that the benefits of making additive empathic responses at Levels 4 and 5 are not contingent on the frequency of their usage. In fact, making one such response in a first or second interview may be helpful and appropriate. More frequent attempts presume a depth of relationship that has not yet developed. Additive empathic responses often exceed the level of feelings and meanings expressed by clients during early sessions and are thus reserved, in large part, for later phases of the helping process.

Because reciprocal responding is an essential skill used frequently to meet the objectives of the first phase of the helping process, we recommend that you first aim to achieve beginning mastery of responding

at Level 3. Extended practice of this skill should significantly increase your effectiveness in establishing viable helping relationships, interviewing, and gathering data. The remainder of this chapter provides guidelines and practice exercises that will help you in mastering reciprocal responding. Although responding at additive levels represents an extension of the skill of reciprocal responding, it is an advanced skill that can be used in a variety of ways to achieve specific objectives. For this reason, it has been grouped with other change-oriented or "action" skills presented in Part 3 of the book.

Constructing Reciprocal Responses

To reach Level 3 on the empathic scale, you must be able to formulate responses that accurately capture the content and the surface feelings in the client message. It is also important to frame the message so that you do not merely restate the client's message.

The following paradigm, which identifies the elements of an empathic or reflective message, has proven useful for conceptualizing and mastering the skill of empathic responding:

You feel _____ about _____ because _____.
Accurately identifies or describes feelings

The response focuses exclusively on the client's message and does not reflect the social worker's conceptualizations.

The following excerpt from a session involving a social worker and a 17-year-old female illustrates the use of the preceding paradigm in constructing an empathic response.

Client: I can't talk to my father without feeling scared and crying. I'd like to be able to express myself and to disagree with him, but I just can't.

Social worker: It sounds as though you just feel panicky when you try to talk to your father. You feel down on yourself, because at this point you can't say what you want without falling apart.

This message conveys a reflection with a twist, which we will explore more in the following chapter (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). That is, it reflects the client's current feeling but implies that it could change at another point when she acquires more confidence and skill (Greene, Lee, & Hoffpauir, 2005). Many times, client messages contain conflicting or contrasting emotions, such as the following: "I like taking drugs, but sometimes I worry about what they might do to me." In such cases, each contrasting feeling should be highlighted:

- *You feel _____, yet you also feel _____.*
- *I sense that you feel torn because while you find taking drugs enjoyable, you have nagging thoughts that they might be harmful to you.*

Note that such highlighting of opposing feelings is a key technique for assisting clients in assessing their readiness for change in the motivational interviewing method (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

Remember that to respond empathically at a reciprocal level, you must use language that your clients will readily understand. Abstract, intellectualized language and professional jargon create barriers to communication and should be avoided. It is also important to vary the language you use in responding. Many professionals tend to respond with stereotyped, repetitive speech patterns, commonly using a limited variety of leads to begin their empathic responses. Such leads as "You feel …" and "I hear you saying …" repeated over and over not only distract the client but also seem phony and contrived. This kind of stereotyped responding draws more attention to the social worker's technique than to his or her message. One of the many advantages to audio or video recording your own work is that these habitual responses—often so instinctive that you don't notice them—will become readily apparent to you.

Below you will find a list of varied introductory phrases that will help you expand your repertoire of possible responses. We encourage you to read the list aloud several times and to review it frequently while practicing the empathic communication training exercises in this chapter and in Chapter 17, which covers additive empathic responding. The reciprocal empathic response format ("You feel _____ because _____") is merely a training tool to assist you in focusing on the affect and content of client messages. The leads list below will help you respond more naturally.

Leads for Empathic Responses

Could it be that …	You're feeling …
I wonder if …	I'm not sure if I'm with you but …
What I guess I'm hearing is …	You appear to be feeling ...

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm sensing …
Perhaps you're feeling …
Sometimes you think …
Maybe this is a long shot, but …
I'm not certain I understand; you're feeling …
As I hear it, you …
Is that the way you feel?
The message I'm getting is that …
Let me see if I'm with you; you …
If I'm hearing you correctly …
So, you're feeling …
You feel …
It sounds as though you are saying …
I hear you saying …
So, from where you sit …
I sense that you're feeling …
Your message seems to be …
I gather you're feeling …
If I'm catching what you say …
What you're saying comes across to me as …
It appears you feel …
Maybe you feel …
Do you feel …
I'm not sure that I'm with you; do you mean …
It seems that you …
Is that what you mean?
What I think I'm hearing is …
I get the impression that …
As I get it, you felt that …
To me it's almost like you are saying …
So, as you see it …
I'm picking up that you …
I wonder if you're saying …
So, it seems to you …
Right now you're feeling …
You must have felt …
Listening to you, it seems as if …
You convey a sense of …
As I think about what you say, it occurs to me you're feeling …
From what you say …
I gather you're feeling …

Exercises designed to help you to develop Level 3 reciprocal empathic responses appear at the end of the chapter and in the *Practice Behaviors Workbook*. Included in the exercises are a variety of client statements taken from actual work with individuals, groups, couples, and families in diverse settings. In addition to the skill development exercises, we recommend that you record the number of empathic responses you employ in sessions over several weeks to determine the extent to which you are applying this skill. We also suggest that either you or a knowledgeable associate rate your responses and determine the mean level of empathic responding for each session. If you find (as most beginning social workers do) that you are underutilizing empathic responses or responding at low levels, you may wish to set a goal to improve your skill.

Employing Empathic Responding

In early sessions with the client, empathic responding should be used frequently as a method of developing rapport with the client. Responses should be couched in a tentative manner to allow for inaccuracies in the social worker's perception. Checking out the accuracy of responses with appropriate lead-in phrases such as "Let me see if I understand …" or "Did I hear you right?" is helpful in communicating a desire to understand and a willingness to correct misperceptions.

In initially using empathic responses, learners are often leery of the flood of emotions that sometimes occurs as the client, experiencing none of the usual barriers to communication, releases feelings that may have been pent up for months or years. It is important to understand that empathic responses have not "caused" such feelings but rather have facilitated their expression, thus clearing the way for the client to explore and to consider such feelings more rationally and objectively.

You may worry, as do many beginning social workers, about whether you will "damage" the client or disrupt the helping relationship if your empathic responses do not always accurately reflect the client's feelings. Perhaps even more important than accuracy, however, is the commitment to understand conveyed by your genuine efforts to perceive the client's experience. If you consistently demonstrate your goodwill and intent to help through attentive verbal and nonverbal responding, an occasional lack of understanding or faulty timing will not damage the client–social worker relationship. In fact, your efforts to clarify the client's message will usually enhance rather than detract from the helping process, particularly if you respond to corrective feedback in an open, nondefensive, and empathic manner.

Multiple Uses of Empathic Communication

Earlier in the chapter, we referred to the versatility of empathic communication. In this section, we delineate a number of ways in which you can employ reciprocal empathic responding.