## j0236214Skill Builder Acknowledging feelings

People experience you as tuning in to them in a personal way when you notice and reflect back their feelings. They experience your attention to their feelings as communication from the heart….and this eases their anxiety.

The skill: Pay attention to the person’s words *and* nonverbal signals and reflect back to them the feeling you think you’re seeing or hearing. This is sometimes called *active listening*.

Frequently the nonverbal cues speak louder than the words, giving away the person’s true feeling. For instance, if the person clenches his or her fists and screws up his or her forehead but then says, “I’m fine” in response to a question “How are you feeling,” he or she is probably not feeling fine. To tune in at a heart level, it’s important to reflect back the *feeling* you think the patient is communicating. For instance, “You seem out of sorts?” Or, “You appear tense. I’m wondering if you’re feeling upset or uncomfortable.”

Acknowledging feelings is a powerful communication tool to use in the heat of the moment when you are facing upset, scared, or angry people. It can help to defuse difficult situations. When people realize that you truly hear them, they no longer need to act difficult to get their message across.

Tuning in to the person in order to acknowledge feelings awakens your empathy and reduces the chance that you will take it personally or become defensive.

### Examples

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| **Situation** | **Response that acknowledges the likely feeling** |
| Patient: “I don’t know WHEN the doctor is going to get here!” | *“You sound pressured. I realize it can be very hard to wait.”* |
| Physician: “I’ve been looking all over for this report!” | *“There’s so much paper to manage. I bet it’s frustrating.”* |
| Patient: “My daughter is coming for me, but she isn’t here! I can’t imagine what’s keeping her!” | *“You sound worried!?”* |
| Patient: “Now what do you want to do to me? Haven’t you done enough already?” | *“Sounds like you’re really tired of all the pushing and probing…. And want some peace!”* |
| Patient: “I don’t see why I have to make follow-up appointment!” | *“Sounds like you feel pretty pressured.”* |
| Patient: “Don’t tell me to do it myself! If I could do it myself, I wouldn’t have asked you for help in the first place.” | *“Feeling nervous or maybe a bit scared about doing this yourself?”* |
| Patient: “You mean I’m going to have to sit here and wait AGAIN?” | *“I can certainly understand if you’re angry.”* |

### Good sentence starters

* “You sound…”
* “You seem….”
* “You look…...”
* “I can imagine this might feel …….
* “Sounds like….”
* “I can imagine….”
* “Feeling….?”

**ACKNOWLEDGING FEELINGS builds trust, reduces anxiety, and eases difficult situations. *People feel understood*. Communicate your caring.**

### Tips

* Listen carefully. Pay attention to nonverbal signals. Tune in to the person’s feelings *behind* their words.
* Reflect the feeling back to them. Word it in such a way that the person has room to correct you.
* Make your words and nonverbal message empathic and accepting.
* Check back with the person to see if you’ve read their feeling correctly. If so, they’ll feel understood. If not, they’ll clarify.
* “You sound really angry about this.”
* “Sounds like you’re relieved?”
* “Does this seem scary?”
* “You seem out of sorts?”
* “You look tense. Are you feeling upset or uncomfortable?”
* “You look frustrated.”
* Don’t say, “I know how you feel.” This makes people angry.

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| **WHEN ACKNOWLEDGING FEELINGS** | |
| **Do** | **Don’t** |
| Turn toward the person. Adopt a posture of presence.  Make and sustain eye contact (unless you sense that this is uncomfortable for the other person).  Show interest by nodding.  Say little words to keep the communication going. "Uh huh", “I see. Mmm.”  Allow long pauses before asking questions; be patient. LISTEN.  Give your full attention; stop other tasks while you’re listening. | Don’t judge.  Don't show disapproval  Don't spend your time preparing your response."  Don't interrupt, evaluate or jump to conclusions.  Don’t steal the spotlight.  Don’t advise  Don’t correct.  Don’t debate. |

### Staff Practice Exercise

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| **Situation** | **What can you say to acknowledge the person’s likely feeling?** |
| Patient says: “I can’t do it!! Stop pushing me so hard!” |  |
| “This co-pay is ridiculous. You people just want to make more money.” |  |
| “What took you so long? I could be dying here.” |  |
| “I want you here now! This needs to be taken care of!” |  |
| “Wow! It’s NOT cancer? I can’t believe it. I was so sure it was.” |  |
| “How long do you think it will take? I can’t wait forever.” |  |