

Communication Strategies

Unit: General Skills

Problem Area: Communication Skills

Lesson: Communication Strategies

■ **Student Learning Objectives.** Instruction in this lesson should result in students achieving the following objectives:

- 1 Describe the importance of communication as it relates to the medical assistant.**
- 2 Describe forms of communication.**
- 3 Identify potential barriers to effective communication.**
- 4 Identify strategies for effective communication.**

■ **Resources.** The following resources may be useful in teaching this lesson:

Bonewit-West, Kathy, Sue Hunt, and Edith J. Applegate. *Today's Medical Assistant—Text and Study Guide—Clinical and Administrative Procedures*. Elsevier Health Sciences, 2008.

Klieger, Diane M. *Saunders Essentials of Medical Assisting*, 2nd ed. W. B. Saunders Company, 2009.

Morton, Tammy B. *Kinn's The Medical Assistant: An Applied Learning Approach*. Saunders Elsevier, 2005.



■ **Equipment, Tools, Supplies, and Facilities**

- ✓ Overhead or PowerPoint projector
- ✓ Visual(s) from accompanying master(s)
- ✓ Copies of sample test, lab sheet(s), and/or other items designed for duplication
- ✓ Materials listed on duplicated items
- ✓ Computers with printers and Internet access
- ✓ Classroom resource and reference materials

■ **Key Terms.** The following terms are presented in this lesson (shown in bold italics):

- chronemics
- haptic communication
- interpersonal communication
- kinesics
- nonverbal communication
- paraverbal communication
- proxemics
- therapeutic communication
- verbal communication

■ **Interest Approach.** Use an interest approach that will prepare the students for the lesson. Teachers often develop approaches for their unique class and student situations. A possible approach is included here.

Take students by surprise by displaying negative verbal and nonverbal communication as they arrive to class. Consider frowning, rolling your eyes, shaking your head and sighing, slamming books on desk, or acting bored, uninterested, or distracted. Display poor body language, or wear something mildly inappropriate or unprofessional for this class (e.g., gym shoes, a wild hair-do, excessive jewelry) to make your point. Linger at your desk, and make the students wait for class to start. Begin class using poor verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., “So, uh, yeah...let’s get started,” using poor eye contact and long pauses, while mumbling and being preoccupied with a magazine). After allowing some time for students to process the set-up, ask students what messages were being conveyed by your verbal and nonverbal communication. Have students write a short description of the impact negative verbal and nonverbal communication could have on a client. Introduce the lesson following a brief discussion.

CONTENT SUMMARY AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Objective 1: Describe the importance of communication as it relates to the medical assistant.

Anticipated Problem: Why is effective communication important for the medical assistant?

- I. Communication and the medical assistant (MA)
 - A. The MA is often the initial point of contact with the client as well as other individuals.
 - B. The MA can often “set the tone” for the client’s visit or phone conversation.
 - C. The MA often spends more time with the client than the physician.
 - D. There are common situations in which the MA is called upon to communicate effectively.
 1. Telephone messages (office greeting; appointment reminders).
 2. Answering, triaging, and transferring of telephone calls with clients.
 3. Telephone and computer/electronic communication with business and other healthcare professionals (e.g., medical supply vendors, consulting physicians, emergency room physicians, nurses, outpatient diagnostic and surgical schedulers).
 4. Written correspondence (e.g., appointment reminders, billing, in-office memos or postings).
 5. Interpersonal communication with clients/family and with physician and other office staff. (**Interpersonal communication** is any person-to-person exchange of a verbal or nonverbal message.)
 - E. Communication can affect clients.
 1. “Sets the tone”
 2. Influences the client’s perception of MA, physician, facility, and quality of the healthcare provided
 3. Helps client sense a continuity of care
 4. Can comfort the client
 5. Influences client’s response to care, treatment, and/or billing
 - F. Communication for medical assistants has multiple goals.
 1. Understand the needs of the client.
 2. Recognize and address barriers to effective communication.

3. Communicate effectively with a variety of individuals and special populations (e.g., clients/family, physicians and other office staff, elderly, children, visually or hearing impaired, pharmaceutical salespeople).
4. Communicate with courtesy, diplomacy, tact, and professionalism.

Teaching Strategy: Have students work in small groups to create lists of situations and scenarios in which the communication skills of the medical assistant would be especially important. Have each group report to the class. Summarize the many situations in which effective communication is essential for medical assistants.

Objective 2: Describe forms of communication.

Anticipated Problem: What are some forms of communication used by the medical assistant?

II. Forms of communication

- A. Medical assistants, as well as other healthcare workers, should use therapeutic communication. **Therapeutic communication** is the person-to-person exchange of verbal or nonverbal messages that has positive influence on the emotional and physical well-being of a client.
- B. Forms of communication include verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal.
 1. **Verbal communication** is the expression of thoughts through words or language. Verbal communication consists of the words we use to deliver or exchange messages. Researchers report that less than 50 percent of messages are transmitted via verbal communication.
 - a. Oral expression (speech)
 - b. Writing
 2. **Nonverbal communication** is the delivery or exchange of thoughts or information without the use of words.
 - a. **Kinesics** is the study of body language. Body language is a form of nonverbal communication. It includes gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, eye and body movements, and body posture or stance.
 - b. Physical attributes (e.g., professional versus nonprofessional dress and appearance).
 - c. **Chronemics** is the study and use of time in nonverbal communication. Punctuality, reasonable wait time, appropriate use of pauses or silence in conversation, and time spent with a client can all be used to communicate respect and concern for the client.
 - d. **Proxemics** is the study of space and distance between individuals as they interact. Researchers estimate the average person requires approximately 1½ to 3 feet of personal space to maintain a normal level of comfort. Encroaching on an individual's personal space may increase the person's anxiety.

- e. **Haptic communication** is the means by which people communicate through touch. In the healthcare field, touch is often used to communicate warmth, sympathy, empathy, compassion, care, and concern. Touch can be therapeutic to clients.
- 3. **Paraverbal communication** is the manner in which individuals communicate through tone (inflection, pitch), volume (intensity), and cadence (rhythmic flow) of voice. It is “how we say what we say.” Research indicates that most messages are transmitted primarily by nonverbal and paraverbal communication.

Teaching Strategy: Use VM–A to illustrate the communication cycle. Have students provide examples of how messages can be conveyed by nonverbal and paraverbal communication, as well as how they can be misinterpreted as a result of these forms of communication. Use VM–B to review definitions. Have students take turns reading lines from VM–C. Discuss the differences in meaning based on word emphasis and tone of voice.

Objective 3: Identify potential barriers to effective communication.

Anticipated Problem: What are some potential barriers to effective communication?

III. Potential barriers to effective communication

- A. Physiological barriers
 - 1. Speech impairments
 - 2. Hearing impairments
 - 3. Visual impairments
- B. Physical and environmental barriers
 - 1. Noise
 - 2. Other distractions
- C. Psychosocial barriers
 - 1. Culture / ethnic background
 - 2. Socioeconomic status
 - 3. Stress, anxiety, anger, or other emotions
 - 4. Age
 - 5. Education
 - 6. Language
 - 7. Unmet needs (Review Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.)
 - 8. Bias/prejudice
 - 9. Others (Solicit student input.)

Teaching Strategy: Have students work in small groups and brainstorm lists of potential barriers to effective communication. Transfer their lists onto a whiteboard, and

have students describe how these items could be potential barriers to communication.
Have students describe how to reduce barriers to communication.

Objective 4: Identify strategies for effective communication.

Anticipated Problem: What are some strategies for effective communication?

IV. Strategies for effective communication

- A. Practice client-centered communication (“the client comes first”).
- B. Understand the needs of the client.
- C. Speak slowly and clearly.
- D. Encourage the client to ask questions.
- E. Avoid medical terminology/jargon; use terms the client understands.
- F. Avoid generalizations and stereotypes.
- G. Practice active versus passive listening (acknowledge, reflect, clarify).
- H. Recognize and address barriers to communication.
 - I. Remain calm and objective; don’t take comments personally.
 - J. Respect personal space.
- K. Avoid sarcasm; be careful with humor.
- L. Be conscious of using appropriate body language and paraverbal communication.
- M. Use pauses and silence appropriately and thoughtfully.
- N. Use touch appropriately (therapeutic touch).
- O. Use other strategies (input from students).

Teaching Strategy: Have students work in small groups to brainstorm strategies for effective communication. Have students consider strategies for special populations, such as children, the elderly, and the visually, hearing, or speech impaired. Use VM–D. Assign LS–A.

■ **Review/Summary.** Use the student learning objectives to summarize the lesson. Have students explain the content associated with each objective. Student responses can be used in determining which objectives need to be reviewed or taught from a different angle. Questions at the ends of chapters in the text book may also be used in the Review/Summary.

■ **Application.** Use the included visual master(s) and lab sheet(s) to apply the information presented in the lesson.

- **Evaluation.** Evaluation should focus on student achievement of the objectives for the lesson. Various techniques can be used, such as student performance on the application activities. A sample written test is provided.

■ **Answers to Sample Test:**

Part One: Matching

1. e
2. g
3. i
4. a
5. c
6. f
7. h
8. d
9. b

Part Two: True/False

1. F
2. T
3. T
4. F
5. T
6. T
7. T
8. F

Part Three: Short Answer

1. Answers will vary. See “Content Summary”: I.D.1–5.
2. Answers will vary but should include the gist of the following: Paraverbal communication is the manner in which individuals communicate through tone (inflection, pitch), volume (intensity), and cadence (rhythmic flow) of voice. It is “how we say what we say.”
3. Answers will vary. See “Content Summary”: III.A–C.
4. Answers will vary. See “Content Summary”: IV.A–N.

Communication Strategies

► Part One: Matching

Instructions: Match the term with the correct definition.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| a. interpersonal communication | f. nonverbal communication |
| b. therapeutic communication | g. kinesics |
| c. haptic communication | h. proxemics |
| d. paraverbal communication | i. chronemics |
| e. verbal communication | |

- _____ 1. The expression of thoughts through words or language
- _____ 2. The study of body language
- _____ 3. The study and use of time in nonverbal communication
- _____ 4. Any person-to-person exchange of a verbal or nonverbal message
- _____ 5. The means by which people communicate through touch
- _____ 6. The delivery or exchange of thoughts or information without the use of words
- _____ 7. The study of space and distance between individuals as they interact
- _____ 8. The manner in which individuals communicate through tone (inflection, pitch), volume (intensity), and cadence (rhythmic flow) of voice
- _____ 9. The person-to-person exchange of verbal or nonverbal messages that has positive influence on the emotional and physical well-being of a client.

► Part Two: True/False

Instructions: Write *T* for true or *F* for false.

- _____ 1. Communication by the medical assistant has little impact on the client.
- _____ 2. The quality of the communication with the medical assistant can “set the tone” for the client’s visit.



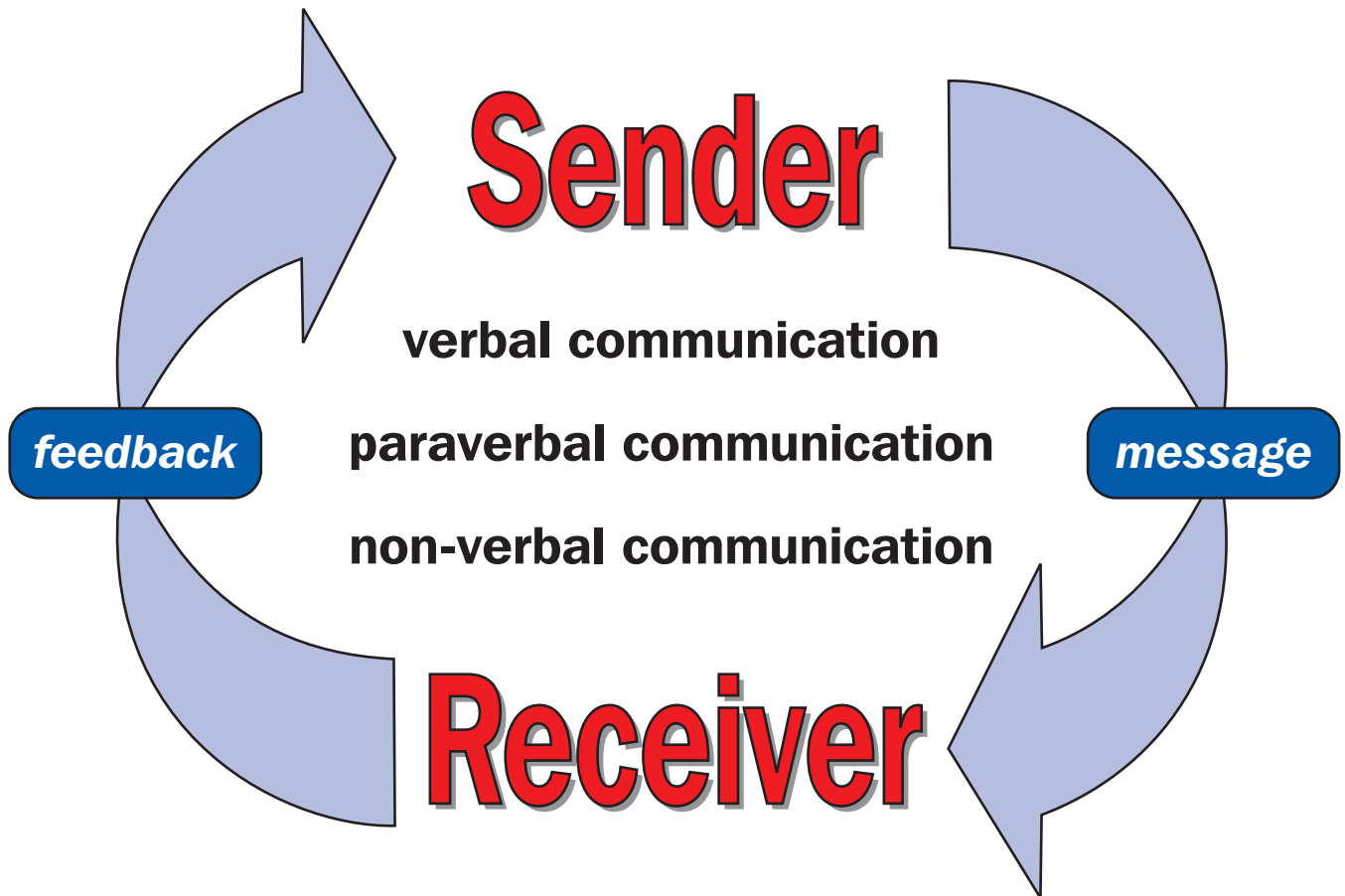
- _____ 3. How the medical assistant interacts and communicates may influence the client's perception of medical assistant, the physician, the facility, and quality of the healthcare provided.
- _____ 4. Communication is a simple transmission that involves only a sender and the message being sent.
- _____ 5. Research indicates that most messages are transmitted primarily by nonverbal and paraverbal communication.
- _____ 6. Verbal communication includes both written and oral expression.
- _____ 7. Punctuality, reasonable wait time, appropriate use of pauses or silence in conversation, and time spent with a client can all be used to communicate respect and concern.
- _____ 8. Touch is always an inappropriate form of communication for the medical assistant.

▶ Part Three: Short Answer

Instructions: Answer the following.

1. Provide three examples of situations in which it is essential that the medical assistant communicate effectively.
2. Briefly explain paraverbal communication.
3. List at least five barriers to effective communication.
4. List at least seven strategies for effective communication.

COMMUNICATION CYCLE



DEFINITION OF TERMS

- ◆ **chronemics**—the study and use of time in nonverbal communication
- ◆ **haptic communication**—the means by which people communicate through touch
- ◆ **interpersonal communication**—any person-to-person exchange of a verbal or nonverbal message
- ◆ **kinesics**—the study of body language
- ◆ **nonverbal communication**—the delivery or exchange of thoughts or information without the use of words
- ◆ **paraverbal communication**—the manner in which individuals communicate through tone (inflection, pitch), volume (intensity), and cadence (rhythmic flow) of voice
- ◆ **proxemics**—the study of space and distance between individuals as they interact
- ◆ **therapeutic communication**—the person-to-person exchange of verbal or nonverbal messages that has positive influence on the emotional and physical well-being of a client
- ◆ **verbal communication**—the expression of thoughts through words or language

PARAVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Instructions:

- ◆ Read the following sentences, emphasizing the word in **bold** type.
- ◆ Explain differences in meaning and implication, based on word emphasis and the tone of voice that could be used with each.

Example #1

- **You** didn't ask me to do that.
- You **didn't** ask me to do that.
- You didn't **ask** me to do that.
- You didn't ask **me** to do that.
- You didn't ask me to **do** that.
- You didn't ask me to do **that**.

Example #2

- I didn't say you were wrong.
- I **didn't** say you were wrong.
- I didn't **say** you were wrong.
- I didn't say **you** were wrong.
- I didn't say you were **wrong**.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

- ◆ Practice client-centered communication (“the client comes first”).
- ◆ Understand the needs of the client.
- ◆ Speak slowly and clearly.
- ◆ Encourage the client to ask questions.
- ◆ Avoid medical terminology/jargon; use terms the client understands.
- ◆ Avoid generalizations and stereotypes.
- ◆ Practice active versus passive listening (acknowledge, reflect, clarify).
- ◆ Recognize and address barriers to communication.
- ◆ Remain calm and objective; don’t take comments personally.
- ◆ Respect personal space.
- ◆ Avoid sarcasm; be careful with humor.
- ◆ Be conscious of using appropriate body language and paraverbal communication.
- ◆ Use pauses and silence appropriately and thoughtfully.
- ◆ Use touch appropriately (therapeutic touch).
- ◆ Other strategies: _____

Communication Strategies in Practice

Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to improve communication skills.

Objectives

1. Identify potential barriers to effective communication.
2. Practice effective communication strategies.

Materials

- ◆ lab sheet
- ◆ writing utensil

Procedure

1. Read each scenario.
2. Identify the potential barrier(s) to effective communication.
3. Suggest ways that you, as the medical assistant, could address the potential communication barrier(s) and effectively communicate with the client.
4. Be prepared to discuss your responses with the class.



Scenario #1

A client calls 10 minutes before his scheduled appointment, sounding agitated, and indicates he will be late in arriving.

Potential communication barrier(s):

How would you manage this situation?

Scenario #2

You did not sleep well because of a cold, and unexpected traffic has made you 20 minutes late for work. When you arrive to work, you find that one of your co-workers overbooked appointments for the day, and the first four clients have all arrived at the same time. As you are registering them, the phone rings, and the client on the phone says she's going out of town and needs to see the doctor today. When you explain there are no appointments open, she gets angry and insists on speaking with the doctor.

Potential communication barrier(s):

How would you manage this situation?

Scenario #3

The doctor is running an hour behind schedule. Mr. Chandler, who had arrived earlier than his scheduled appointment, has been waiting for an hour and 15 minutes. He approaches the desk and in an angry voice inquires, “Did you forget about me? My appointment was more than an hour ago! Why are these other people going in ahead of me?”

Potential communication barrier(s):

How would you manage this situation?

Scenario #4

Mrs. Gonzalez, a Hispanic client who speaks limited English, arrives with her 19-year-old daughter. Mrs. Gonzalez is scheduled for a routine exam, her yearly Pap test, and some blood work. Your office is in the process of updating all the clients’ insurance information, and Mrs. Gonzalez needs to complete new paperwork.

Potential communication barrier(s):

How would you manage this situation?

Scenario #5

Mr. Mendelson, a new client, arrives at the office. He is an elderly, hearing-impaired client who wears a hearing aid and uses a cane. Before his appointment, you need to go over his insurance information, explain the privacy policy, and review the office billing procedures. The reception room is full, and there is a baby crying loudly.

Potential communication barrier(s):

How would you manage this situation?

Scenario #6

You overhear a co-worker, another medical assistant, talking with Mrs. Anderson, an elderly client. She tells Mrs. Anderson, "I see the doctor thinks you have acute pyelonephritis and a UTI. So we're going to need you to void in this cup so we can do a urine C&S." Mrs. Anderson looks confused and frightened.

Potential communication barrier(s):

How would you manage the situation with your co-worker?

How would you manage the situation with Mrs. Anderson?

Scenario #7

While answering phone calls, you need to put an anxious parent of an ill child on hold temporarily in order to take another call. The new caller is requesting an appointment but is not a current client of the doctor. The doctor is not accepting any new clients unless they have been referred by another physician. The caller has not been referred by a physician but by a former client. When you briefly explain that the doctor is not accepting new clients, the caller becomes upset and insistent.

Potential communication barrier(s):

How would you handle the anxious parent of the ill child?

How would you handle the caller insisting on an appointment?