

## CHAPTER SIX

# Therapeutic Communication

What kind of thoughts do you have when you read the words, *therapeutic communication*? Are they: "No big deal. Those questions are really easy for me," or "Yuck! Not therapeutic communication. I hate those questions!"

No matter what your response is to therapeutic communication, you are familiar with the topic. After all, you were drilled in therapeutic communication throughout nursing school because communication is essential in order to be a safe and effective nurse. On the job, you must be able to communicate effectively with your clients, family members, significant others, and other members of the health care team. Communicating therapeutically is emphasized on the NCLEX<sup>®</sup> because it is critical to your success as a beginning practitioner.

Therapeutic communication means listening to and understanding the client while promoting clarification and insight. It enables the nurse to form a working relationship with both the patient and peers, using both verbal and nonverbal communication. Remember that nonverbal communication is the most accurate reflection of attitude.

Therapeutic responses include those found on the next page.

**RESPONSE**

**GOAL/PURPOSE**

Using silence

Allows the client time to think and reflect. conveys acceptance. Allows the client to take the lead in conversation.

Using general leads or broad opening

Encourages the client to talk. Indicates your interest in the client. Allows the client to choose the subject.

Clarification

Encourages recall and details of a particular experience. Encourages description of feelings. Seeks explanation; pinpoints specifics.

Reflecting

Paraphrases what client says. Reflects on what client says, especially the feelings conveyed.

There are many questions on the NCLEX® that require you to select the correct therapeutic communication response. As with other answer choices on the NCLEX®, you must select the BEST answer from:

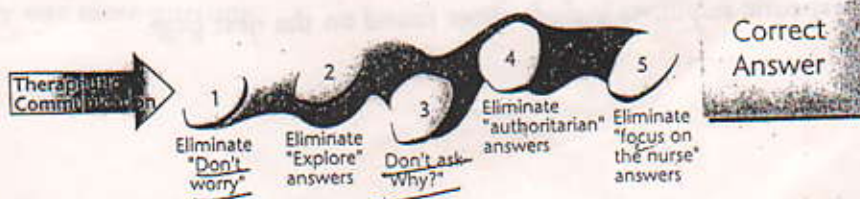
- Four answer choices that you believe are all correct.
- Four answer choices that you believe are all wrong.

Using the following strategies will help you select the correct answers.

**HOW TO SELECT THE CORRECT THERAPEUTIC COMMUNICATION ANSWER**

**Eliminate!**

Do not look for the correct response. Instead, eliminate the wrong answers.



Use this strategy:

Step 1. Use the following strategies to eliminate answer choices.

*Step 2.* If there is more than one response left, identify the answer choice that reflects feelings and provides information.

### Strategies for Therapeutic Communication

As with other NCLEX® questions, one of the biggest errors that students commit when trying to answer therapeutic communication is to *look for the correct answer*. Remember, you are selecting the *best* answer from the four possible answers that you are given. To select the *best* answer, you must eliminate responses.

Use these strategies to eliminate answer choices:

#### Authoritarian Answers

Eliminate answer choices in which the nurse is telling the patient what to do without regard to the patient's desires or feelings. Examples include:

- Insisting that the patient follow unit rules.
- Insisting that the patient do what you command, immediately.

#### Close-Ended Questions

Eliminate close-ended questions that can be answered with the words *yes*, *no*, or another monosyllabic response. Close-ended questions discourage the client from sharing thoughts and feelings. Examples include:

- "Are you feeling guilty about what happened?"
- "How many children do you have?"

#### "Why" Questions

Eliminate responses that are "why" questions: ones that seek reasons or justification. "Why" questions imply disapproval of the patient who may become defensive. A "why" question can come in many forms and need not always begin with "why." Any response that puts the patient on the defensive is nontherapeutic and therefore incorrect. Some examples of "why" responses:

- "What makes you think that?"
- "Why do you feel this way?"

#### "Let's Explore" Questions

Another incorrect answer choice that many graduate nurses select is the choice that includes the word "explore." On the NCLEX®, avoid being a junior psychiatrist. It isn't the nurse's role to delve into the reasons why the patient is feeling a particular way. The patient must be allowed to

#### Why Ask Why?

Remember, don't ask why!

verbalize the fact that he or she is sad, angry, fearful, or overwhelmed. Some examples of "let's explore" responses:

- "Let's talk about why you didn't take your medication."
- "Tell me why you *really* injured yourself."

#### "Don't Worry" Questions

Eliminate answer choices that offer false reassurance. These responses would discourage communication between the nurse and the patient by not allowing the patient to explore his or her own ideas and feelings. False reassurance also discounts what the patient is feeling. Some examples:

- "It is going to be OK."
- "Don't worry. Your doctors will do everything necessary for your care."

#### Nurse-Focused Answers

Eliminate all answer choices if the focus of the comment is on the nurse. Be careful, because these answer choices may sound very empathetic. The focus of your communication should always be on the patient. Examples of responses to avoid:

- "That happened to me once."
- "I know from experience this is hard for you."

Using these types of nontherapeutic responses to eliminate possible answer choices is a very effective way of answering therapeutic communication questions. Don't simply look for the specific words that you see here; you may need to "translate" the answer choices into the above errors of therapeutic communication.

#### Using the Process of Elimination

How do you select the correct response? By choosing whatever response is left! The correct response will usually contain one or both of the following elements:

**Give correct information.** Offering information encourages further communication from the client. Examples of giving correct information include:

- "You are experiencing acute alcohol withdrawal; you may see and feel things that aren't real."
- "There are many reasons for memory loss; tell me more about what you have noticed."

### This Isn't about You

Focus on the *client*, not on the nurse.

*Be empathetic and reflect the patient's feelings.* Empathy is the ability to perceive what another person experiences using that person's frame of reference. Reflection communicates to the patient that the nurse has heard and understands what the patient is trying to communicate. When reflecting feelings, the nurse focuses on the feelings and not the content of what is said. Examples of empathetic, reflective statements:

- "I can see that you are frightened about being here."
- "You seem very upset. Tell me how you're feeling."

Let's practice these strategies on NCLEX®-style test questions.

A 50-year-old woman is admitted to the emergency room with a diagnosis of acute myocardial infarction. She tells the nurse, "I'm scared, I think I'm going to die." Which of the following responses by the nurse would be MOST appropriate?

- 1. "Everything is going to be fine. We'll take good care of you."
- 2. "I know what you mean. I thought I was having a heart attack once."
- 3. "I'll call your doctor, so you can discuss it."
- 4. "It's normal to feel frightened. We're doing everything we can for you."

*Step 1.* Eliminate incorrect answer choices using the strategies.

- (1) This is a "don't worry" response. There is no acknowledgment of the patient's fears. Eliminate it.
- (2) The focus of this response is on the nurse, not the patient. Eliminate it.
- (3) It is within the scope of nursing practice for the nurse to respond to the patient's feelings. Don't pass the buck. Eliminate it.
- (4) Responds to feeling and provides information.

*Step 2.* One answer was not eliminated: (4). This is the correct answer. The nurse acknowledges that the patient feels frightened and provides information.

That wasn't so bad, right? Let's try another question.

### A Word from Harry Truman

Don't pass the buck. Know what is within the scope of the RN's responsibilities.

A 28-year-old mother of two children is to undergo a breast biopsy. She tells the nurse, "If I lose my breast, I know my husband will no longer find me attractive." Which of the following responses, by the nurse, would be MOST appropriate?

- 1. "You don't know if you are going to lose your breast. They are just doing the biopsy now."
- 2. "You should focus on your children. They are young and they need you."
- 3. "You seem to be concerned that your relationship with your husband might change."
- 4. "Why don't you wait and see what your husband's reaction is before you get upset."

### This Isn't the Army

Don't be authoritarian.

*Step 1.* Eliminate answers.

- (1) This response gives false reassurance and discounts the patient feelings. Eliminate it.
- (2) This response is authoritarian: the nurse tells the patient what to do. Eliminate it.
- (3) This response reflects the fears of the patient. The response is open-ended and allows the patient to express what she is feeling. Keep it in for consideration.
- (4) This response dismisses the feelings that the patient is experiencing and gives advice. Eliminate it.

*Step 2.* You have eliminated 3 answer choices. The correct answer is (3)

Try one more question.