

Module Subject: Non-Verbal Communication in Patient-Provider Interactions

Included in This Module:

1. PowerPoint slides with lecture notes (in the Notes section of the PowerPoint)
2. Activity Guide for Instructors
3. Role-play activity handouts
4. Discussion guide for instructors
5. Additional resources

Desired Module Outcomes:

- Briefly explain the concept of non-verbal communication.
- Encourage students to recognize non-verbal cues that someone may want to have a conversation about mental illness.
- Provide non-verbal tactics that help create a welcoming conversation environment.

Estimated Time to Complete Module: 25-30 minutes with activity and lecture

Activity Guide for Instructors:

Note: This activity is to be used in conjunction with the lecture slides, and should be conducted immediately preceding the lecture. In the lecture slides, Slide 3 is a placeholder for this activity.

The **goal** of this activity is to help students experience first-hand the subtlety, and importance, of non-verbal communication by observing an improvised interaction. Two students are asked to role-play a scenario in which one friend, “Morgan,” is hiding a secret from the other friend, “Taylor,” while the other students observe the interaction. The role-playing students are given small prompts, but neither is given an overview of the full situation (i.e. they don’t know what the other role-player knows). Observing students are given a handout with questions about the non-verbal communication they are observing.

To conduct the activity:

1. Divide the class into groups of 5-10 students, whatever your room can reasonably accommodate.
2. Each group should circle up around two seats that are facing each other. If there is not room for that, place two seats close to each other, and ask that students in each group arrange themselves so that they can all see the two seats.
3. Within each group, ask for two volunteers. Choose students who are comfortable acting in front of a small group.
4. Give each volunteer a “character sheet” that explains their role (printed on the next page of this guide).
5. Hand out the observer worksheets.
6. Have the two volunteers sit in the chairs in the middle of the circle and go through the role play. Encourage the role-players to act naturally, and to not be shy – make your actions big and obvious!
7. During the role-play scenario, observers should take notes on their question sheet.
8. Allow about 3-5 minutes for the role-play, then bring the two groups back together to de-brief. Questions to ask the students:
 - Describe how you think each person was FEELING.
 - How were they ACTING to make you think that?
 - How would this conversation be different if it was over the phone, if Morgan and Taylor couldn’t see each other?

In the context of mental health, it is important that healthcare providers pay attention to, recognize, and understand patients’ non-verbal communication, because patients may not always feel confident or safe enough to tell a physician when they have mental health concerns – but their non-verbal communication can encourage a provider to bring the subject up gently and carefully. In this way, providers and patients may have important conversations that the patients otherwise wouldn’t initiate.

Role-Play Activity: Handouts for Role-Playing Students

(Instructor: Print out copies of this page before class, and cut each full sheet into two “scripts.” The number of copies you need depends on how many students you have, and how many small groups you will break them into. Each group needs a “Morgan” and a “Taylor.”)

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS SILENTLY!

Your name is Morgan. You are a 19-year-old student, living in a dorm on campus. You recently adopted a cute puppy, and are very excited about it! You want to tell everyone—BUT pets are not allowed in your dorm; if the puppy is discovered, you will have to give it away AND you might be kicked out, as punishment. Your R.A., Taylor, is also your good friend (you often hang out together on weekends).

You run into Taylor on campus and have a conversation. During this conversation, your goals are to:

- Try to determine if Taylor knows about your puppy.
 - If you believe Taylor doesn't already know about the puppy, decide if you can trust them enough to share this secret—maybe Taylor would be cool about it?
 - Try to end the conversation as quickly as possible without being suspicious.
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READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS SILENTLY!

Your name is Taylor. You are an R.A. for the campus dorm, where Morgan lives. You and Morgan are also friends— you hang out all the time. However, lately you've noticed that Morgan is acting a bit suspicious: spending a lot of time in their room, never opening the door too far when you stop by unannounced, etc. You've also heard some weird noises coming from Morgan's room.

In this scenario, you run into Morgan on campus. Your goals are to:

- Start a friendly conversation.
- Subtly determine if Morgan is hiding something from you. You don't want to see *too* suspicious! Try to get Morgan to open up and talk honestly with you.
- Keep the conversation going as long as possible.

Role-Play Activity: Handouts for Observing Students

Use two words to describe how you think MORGAN is *feeling*. (example: thrilled, bored, etc.)

What is MORGAN *doing* that makes you think they are feeling that way? What behaviors is he/she exhibiting? (example: fidgeting, laughing, etc.)

What do you notice about how MORGAN is *talking*? (Think about volume, “um’s,” etc.)

Now, think about TAYLOR: Use two words to describe how you think TAYLOR is *feeling*. (example: nervous, goofy, etc.)

What is TAYLOR *doing* that makes you think they are feeling that way? What behaviors is he/she exhibiting?

Discussion Guide:

(*Instructors:* You can expand this module with a full-class discussion, or assign a take-home reflective essay, using the following questions.)

- Why is it important that healthcare providers can read and understand patients' non-verbal communication?
- Why do you think patients are sometimes hesitant to initiate conversations with healthcare providers about mental health?
- Why do you think *providers* are sometimes hesitant to initiate conversations with patients about mental health?
- Imagine you are a healthcare provider, and you suspect that a patient may be struggling with a mental health issue, but is not initiating a conversation with you about it. What might you do or say to help the patient feel comfortable opening up to you?



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Additional Resources:

If you are interested to learn more about non-verbal communication between providers and patients, see the following (free) resources:

- MedPro Group: Their free PDF, “Communicating Effectively With Patients to Improve Quality and Safety” ([available here](#)) is an organized, evidence-based overview of the importance of effective provider-patient communication, including tips on how to improve non-verbal communication.
- Lius, Calvo & Lim (2016). Improving medical students’ awareness of their non-verbal communication through automated non-verbal behavior feedback. *Frontiers in ICT*, 3(11). doi: 10.3389/fict.2016.00011