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COMMUNICATION
SKILLS FOR HEALTH
PROFESSIONALS**

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Effective Communication Skills for Health Professionals

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For Paul and Sandy

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Introduction

We are all communicating, nearly all of the time. What we say, how we say it, what we wear, how we sit and so on: all of these things are aspects of how we present ourselves to other people. We may not be able to do anything about that. What we can improve, is our *means* of communication. We can do much to improve the way we communicate. Consider the following situations:

- You are working with a colleague who is senior to you and whom you don't like very much;
- You are interviewing a teenage boy about his family;
- You are 'off duty' and having a drink with some of your colleagues;
- You are presenting a short paper to a conference on some research that you have just completed;
- You are asked to write a report on what you see as health care priorities in your area;
- You are at home with the person you live with or with your family and a client rings to talk to you.

In each case you are communicating. But do you communicate easily and effectively in each of these situations? Which situation would be easiest for you and which would you try to avoid? Would you be 'yourself' in each situation or would you have to bluff a little in some of them? This book is about some of the skills involved in coping with these and other health care situations.

Effective Communication Skills for Health Professionals is about practical ways of enhancing communication between health professionals and their patients or clients and between those professionals and their colleagues. Its aim is to encourage you to think about how you present yourself to others in everyday life. There is no right way, no single method of ensuring that you will be understood by others. There are a lot of straightforward methods of helping you to communicate more effectively. This book highlights some of those ways and points to some obstacles that may get in your way.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

Communication is a vital aspect of health care. Just look around you at your colleagues and notice the degree to which they communicate effectively. More painfully, perhaps, look at yourself as you talk to patients, clients or colleagues. Most of us can benefit from a little self-analysis and a bit of rethinking about taken-for-granted aspects of how we come across to others.

This book is for all students in the health care professions and at all levels: in basic training or education, at diploma, graduate and post-graduate levels. It will be of use to doctors, nurses, occupational therapists, speech therapists, social workers and voluntary workers — anyone who is intimately involved in managing, caring for or working with others.

WHAT IS IN THE BOOK

The book focuses on clusters of skills. Those communication skills are identified under the following headings:

- educational skills
- therapeutic skills
- organizational skills
- personal skills

Part One opens with a chapter which discusses teaching skills and will be useful to anyone who has to teach colleagues or clients in any setting. Whilst there are a variety of philosophies of teaching and learning, many of the basic structural aspects of teaching can be identified easily. The approach taken in this chapter is concerned with adult teaching and learning.

In the second chapter, presentational skills are addressed. Many health professionals find that it is only a matter of time before they are called upon to talk to a fairly large audience — at a conference or presentation. This chapter explores ways of making such presentations effective. The skills involved here will also be helpful when you have to present cases or plans to colleagues or managers in various settings.

The first part of the book closes with a chapter on computers and computing skills: what to look for and what computers can do to make your communication more effective.

INTRODUCTION

The second part of the book focuses on therapeutic skills. Chapters 4 and 5 describe a range of listening and counselling skills. Chapter 6 is about running groups. Again, the emphasis in these chapters is on developing skills.

The focus of the third part is organizational skills. Senior health professionals (and, increasingly, more junior ones) all have to manage other people. How do you do it? Traditionally, many health professionals have never received training or education in management; they have tended to learn by doing it. Chapter 7 looks at general management skills. Chapter 8 discusses the skills involved in managing meetings and the section closes with a chapter on interview skills.

The final part of the book is more personal. It deals with aspects of self-presentation or what is sometimes called 'impression management'. Chapter 10 identifies a structured approach to improving writing skills. Assertiveness is addressed in Chapter 11 and the book closes with a chapter on a topic that underpins all of the others: self-awareness.

The last section of the book is a Communication Skills Questionnaire which you can use in one or more of the following ways:

- As a self-assessment and self-evaluation instrument before, during and after reading this book;
- As a means of identifying which skills you need to work on further;
- As a basis for discussion in group work.

The book closes with a detailed bibliography of further reading so that the themes in this book can be followed through.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

The emphasis throughout the book is on two issues:

- The development of practical communication skills;
- The reader's growing awareness of her or his own communication skills.

The aim is always practical. Theory and research are referred to and referenced throughout the text but the reader who wants

more detail of any given concept or skill is referred to the detailed bibliography.

You may want to read the book through at one sitting. More likely, though, you will turn to sections or chapters on issues that currently concern you. Each chapter can stand on its own and describes and discusses specific skills. You can easily dip into sections of it.

At the end of each of the four sections, there is a skills checklist. These are to encourage you to reflect further on your own skill levels. They can also encourage discussion or disagreement. As I have noted above, there is no right way in human communication. The point, though, is to become increasingly aware of how *you* communicate and of the effect you have on others when you do.

Finally, a point about language. I have tended to keep it personal throughout the book and refer to 'you' — the reader. I have also referred to the health professional as 'she' and the health care recipient as 'he'. I am aware of the problems of sexism in writing but can find no better compromise at the moment. I have adopted the word 'client' to refer to any health care receiver. Again, I appreciate that some people may prefer the word 'patient' or 'resident' or other descriptor. I feel that the word 'client' is far more straightforward to read than a lengthy 'client/patient/resident' label!

I hope you will find the book useful and enjoy working through the activities. I hope, too, that you will take issue with some (but not all!) of the things I have written. The science and art of human relationships are still fairly new. We have a long way to go before we understand what happens when two or more people meet and talk to each other. In the meantime, as we care for other people, we can try.

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