

Practique Clinique et Investigation

Non-verbal Communication: Be Kind with What You Wordlessly Say

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ABSTRACT

Non-verbal communication is subconscious and usually an adjunct to verbal communication and refers to the use of body language to communicate ideas. It has an important role to play in effective communication. In fact the message carried by non-verbal means speak louder and express better than the actual spoken words. The physical attitude of our body, facial expressions, gazes and body gestures all convey our intentions and purpose while we communicate. It is most important that what we convey by words we speak and by our body language should match and should not be contradictory. Thumping your fist on the table in office while stating that you are approachable to anyone and everyone at any time of the day is not a fair way to communicate. This review article touches upon the importance of non-verbal communication and brings out the significance of soft skills and empathy in the medical profession.

Keywords: *Non-verbal communication; Body language; Soft skills; Body gestures*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is mutual exchange of facts, thoughts and perception, resulting in common understanding of all parties and it generally involves two or more individuals. It doesn't mean mere exchange of messages nor does it imply agreements. It is a two-way process, is purpose oriented and involves psycho-social aspects like thoughts, feelings and emotions. It is classified into organizational communication, interpersonal communication and intrapersonal communication. It can be verbal vocal and non-verbal. Communication in which words-spoken or written- are used is verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is subconscious and usually an adjunct to verbal communication and refers to the use of body language to communicate ideas.

Non-verbal communication has an important role to play in effective communication. Nonverbal behaviour, tone of voice, and words are three basic elements of face-to-face communication [1]. According to experts in human communication, only about 7 percent of the meaning or content of the message is carried by the actual words being used. Another 38 percent of the message is carried by one's tone of voice which includes pacing, tuning, pauses, accents. The major part of 55 percent of the content of the message is non-verbal in the form of our physical attitude or body language which is conveyed through our actions or gestures. Mehrabian and Ferris even developed a formula for verbal and non-verbal effects of a message: Total impact = 07 verbal + 38 vocal + 55 facial [2].

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DISCUSSION

A significant proportion of human communication is nonverbal. What we don't say can be as important as what we do say. Body language is a type of nonverbal communication in which the body communicates the message. It suggests numerous tell-tale nonverbal signs of hidden deception, superiority, fear, discomfort, anxiety, subordination, weakness, strength, openness and disgust.

Body gestures which communicate may relate to handshake, smile, eye-contact, posture while standing or sitting, facial expression while listening, the shrug of shoulders and the movement of any part of your body. It is important to be careful about your body language not contradicting your verbal message which is so difficult because non-verbal communication is so unavoidable and involuntary that we are not even aware of it [3].

Empathy

Empathy in simple terms is to 'feel someone else's pain. Maya Angelou had famously and so rightly said that "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Empathy is to take in the perspective of others, and to distinguish between our own and others' emotions. Martin Buber described the concept of empathy by labelling the empathic relationship as "I and Thou," versus unempathic disrespect, as "I and It" [4].

Soft Skills

Soft skills are desirable qualities that do not depend upon acquired knowledge: they include common sense, ability to deal with people and a positive flexible attitude. They are also known as transferrable skills, people's skills or social skills. They define your relationship with others or how you approach life and work. Ironically soft skills are hardest skills to develop, however they can also be taught and learnt [5]. They are your ability to recognize and manage your own and others' emotions. Unlike hard skills there is no exam which proves that you have them, however they can be roughly estimated by how well you manage relationships with your family, friends and co-workers.

Physicians

Non-verbal communication and soft skills are of prime importance in the medical profession and impact doctor patient relationship as well as the clinical outcome. The communication skills of Physicians play a major role in clientele satisfaction and trustfulness of patients on their doctors [5]. Communication skills of Physicians are considered as core skills required to be a successful healer [5]. Empathic medical care is associated with many benefits including improved patient experiences, adherence to treatment recommendations, better clinical outcomes, fewer medical errors and malpractice claims, and higher physician retention [6]. Although doctors know which behaviors improve rapport and facilitate positive patient outcomes, most of them face difficulties changing their behaviour [7]. Studies have shown that empathy declines during medical training [8].

Lady Doctor

A study revealed that female physicians showed greater engagement in patient-centered communication and their consultation times were longer [9]. On the Jefferson Scale of Physician Empathy, female medical students scored significantly higher than male medical students [10]. Nursing profession which is demanding and one of the oldest professions has predominantly females, maybe because females are more empathetic, perceptive, and warm-hearted [11].

What exactly makes the Non - Verbal Communication?

Nonverbal behaviour representing warmth and patient hearing conveying empathy, care, reassurance, and support in the form of more eye contact, more leaning forward, more nodding and gestures, and closer interpersonal distance makes the patient feel more comfortable and at ease with the attending Physician [12]. Equal distribution of gaze toward the patient, adequate nodding, directly facing the patient and accordance of speech rate and voice volume were correlated with high ratings to the treating physician by the patient [13]. Nonverbal communication generally refers to eye contact, body and extremity movement, posture, facial expressions, voice tone and gestures [14].

Making the patient realize that his doctor is not only listening but also hearing him most carefully and patiently will definitely have a positive impact in his treatment as well as clientele satisfaction. A pleasing and smiling expression indicates openness, and quiet dignity; it positively reinforces interaction between patients and physicians [15]. Nodding and smiling by the physician were correlated with patient satisfaction and the physician's perceived friendliness [12]. Regarding tone of voice, a higher dominance tone of voice in surgeons is associated with malpractice claims history whereas non-dominant tone of voice is related to patient satisfaction [16,17]. Fewer pauses and proper response latencies have been associated with patient-clinician involvement and rapport [18]. On the other hand, too much silence during a medical interview risks conveying a sense of threat or intimidation, a lack of acknowledgement, and a reinforcement of power [15]. In contrast to the verbal statements, his intentions and beliefs can be inferred from how he moves his body or modulates his facial expressions [19].

CONCLUSION

Nonverbal behaviour contributes significantly to all interpersonal communication. One should be aware of one's own nonverbal behaviour and persistently try to improve one's ability to establish a rapport and maintain an alliance with whosoever one interacts with.

Empathy is different from sympathy and is described as feeling one's way into the experience of another and an expression of 'I feel your pain'.

Soft skills have a pivotal role in the medical profession and are of prime importance for a physician while communicating with the patient and his relatives. The treating doctor should be in constant touch with the patient's family keeping them updated with the progress or deterioration in the condition of the patient [20]. Improving communication skills will prevent doctors from facing violence in the long run [20].

Non-verbal aspects of communication are known to have a positive impact on the physician-patient-relationship and improves clientele satisfaction. Courteous, approachable, smiling, soft spoken, empathetic physicians with friendly behaviour have shown to have better doctor-patient relationship and better patient satisfaction levels.

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