

Effective Communication Skills: Key to Success in a Peer Specialist's Work on an Interdisciplinary Team

Anthony Russo, Certified Peer Specialist
Patricia Sweeney, Psy.D., CPRP

Necessity of Effective Communication in Providing Peer Support Services in VHA

This is important because:

- ❑ Results are important when working under pressure or time constraints. Communicating in an effective manner with Veterans and other health care providers can be a valuable timesaver and produce the desired results.
- ❑ Critical care life issues can become the norm in the life of a Veteran who is in recovery. Effective communication and timely responses to the Veteran's concerns can relieve undue anxiety, stress, and worry for the Veteran and help connect him/her to needed services and resources.
- ❑ Effectively communicating as a member of an interdisciplinary team is important because it ensures that all members of the team are well-informed regarding a Veteran's health care services—and results in a level of continuity of care that has been proven to be most beneficial in the lives of the Veterans that we serve.

Communication within an Interdisciplinary Team

- ❑ You will need to interact effectively with other health care professionals on your team and with staff on other interdisciplinary teams in order to fulfill your roles and responsibilities as a peer specialist working within VHA.
- ❑ Sometimes, in an effort to advocate for yourself or a Veteran who you are assisting, you may find yourself communicating with another staff member who does not share your opinion on an issue.
- ❑ How you negotiate conflicts with colleagues is important.
- ❑ Benefits to being collaborative and solution-oriented in your communications with other staff:
 - ❑ Promotes a positive work environment and other staff will want to work with you
 - ❑ Keeps up morale
 - ❑ Encourages open lines of communication in order for the interdisciplinary team to function and serve Veterans' needs and interests.

Related VHA Peer Support Staff Competencies

Here are some of the expected knowledge and skills for VHA peer specialists that are related to effective communication skills.

Communication Domain

- Practices patience, kindness, warmth, and dignity with everyone that the peer specialist interacts with in his/her work.
- Uses respectful, strengths-oriented language in interpersonal interactions with Veterans, Veterans' families, and colleagues as well as documentation of the peer specialist's work.
- Recognizes when to ask questions or share personal experiences and when to listen.
- Asks open-ended questions that allow more information to be shared and can allow an individual to discover his/her own inner wisdom.
- Listens to others with careful attention to the content and emotion being communicated.
- Demonstrates understanding and validates others' experiences and feelings.
- Communicates in a timely manner with other members of a Veteran's treatment team and shares all relevant information needed to assist the Veteran with his/her goals and current needs.

VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

Peer Support Practices Domain

- Develops collaborative relationships with Veterans as part of a treatment team to assist Veterans' engagement with services that are beneficial to their recovery.

Managing Crisis and Emergency Situations Domain

- Provides reassurance and support to Veterans in distress and works collaboratively with colleagues to connect the Veterans with clinical providers' services when needed.

Workplace Skills Domain

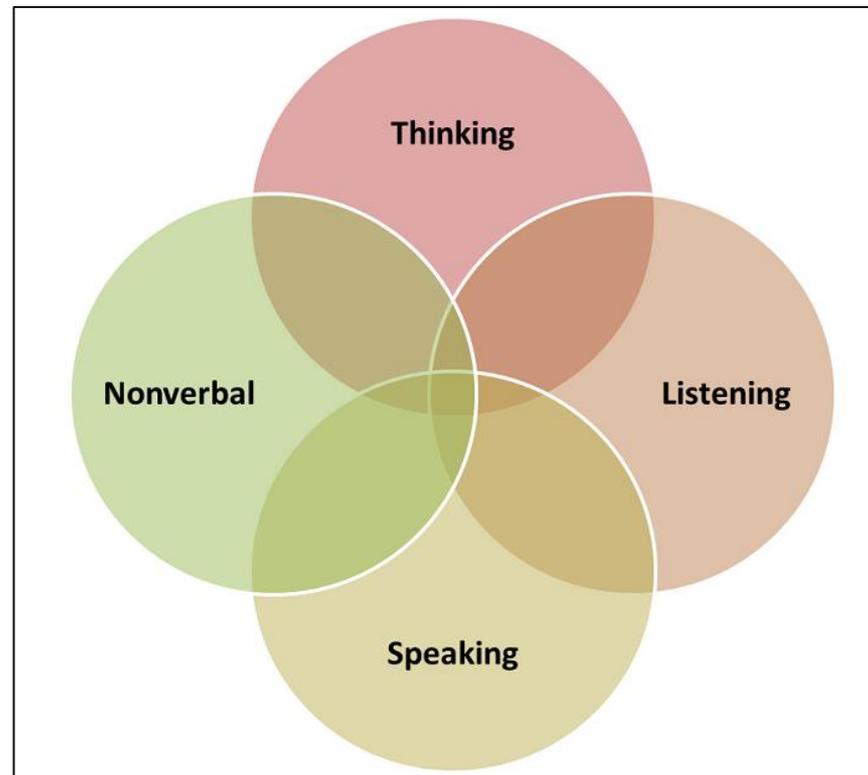
- Participates as an active member in interdisciplinary team discussions.
- Demonstrates effective communication skills and professionalism in use of technologies (ex. phone, email).

Cultural Competence Domain

- Demonstrates understanding of how race, ethnicity, spirituality, gender, sexual orientation, military background, socioeconomic status, and other subcultural influences can impact an individual's belief systems, interpersonal interactions, and approach to recovery.
- Demonstrates understanding of own personal values and culture and how they may contribute to beliefs, judgment, and biases in how to approach the peer specialist's work.
- Demonstrates capability in interacting sensitively and effectively with individuals from various cultural backgrounds.

Brief Refresher: 4 Basic Communication Skills

Each of these skills can help you communicate more effectively in your role as a peer specialist in VHA:



(Figure 1: The Four Communication Skills, n.d.)

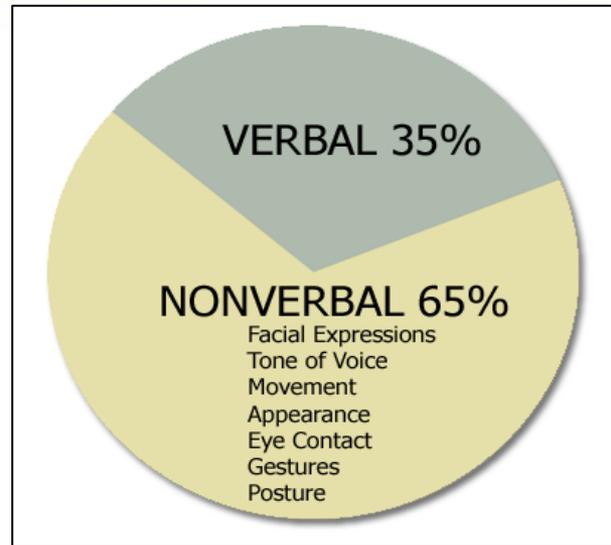
Brief Refresher: Thinking

Remember:

- ❑ Effective communication takes planning and preparation.
- ❑ Have a desired objective of what you want to achieve in the communication (ex. asking for help with a task; sharing relevant information with others).
- ❑ Plan the main points that you want to convey.
- ❑ Have a clear idea of how you will convey your points to optimize timeliness and effectiveness (ex. email, phone call, or in-person communication). Be as concise and precise as possible with your message.



Brief Refresher: Verbal & Nonverbal Communication



(Figure 2: Timmins, n.d.)

❑ Verbal Communication:

Use of questions, supportive statements, and minimal encouragers (ex. “Uh-huh,” “Tell me more”) encourage the conversation to continue and deepen.

❑ Nonverbal Communication:

Communication is not just about what we say. Our facial expressions, tone of voice, movement, appearance, eye contact, gestures, and posture all play a part in how we communicate with others.

Brief Refresher: Open-Ended & Closed-Ended Questions

❑ Open-Ended Questions:

Asked in a way that elicits more comprehensive answers. Open-ended questions usually begin with “What,” “How,” “When,” and “Where.”

Examples: “How can I help you today?” “What could we do to solve this issue?”

❑ Close-Ended Questions:

Usually begin with “Is,” “Do,” “Are,” and “Were” and call for brief, “Yes”/“No” types of answers. Close-ended questions can be helpful (or not) depending upon the length of time available for the interaction and the information you need to obtain. For interactions that are brief, close-ended questions are useful for obtaining needed information quickly.

Examples: “Are you going to the staff meeting tomorrow?” “Do you want me to call the Veteran to remind him about the appointment?” “Is (name of staff member) here today?”

Brief Refresher: Tips about Nonverbal Communication

- Maintain a relaxed posture while sitting or standing.
- Nod your head occasionally to demonstrate that you are listening.
- Maintain culturally appropriate eye contact.
- Keep your tone of voice neutral, positive, and relaxed.
- Face the person speaking to you.
- Maintain a friendly expression.
- Move away from any physical barrier (ex. desk, table) between you and the person with whom you are speaking.
- Avoid nervous mannerisms like:
 - Restlessly moving in your chair when sitting
 - Fiddling with keys, pens, pencils, coins, etc.
 - Drumming your fingers and/or tapping your feet

Brief Refresher: Listening

- Give your complete attention to the other person.
- Be silent! Allow the other person space and time to talk.
- Think about what you are hearing while you listen to the person. Listen for the feelings and meaning behind the words being spoken.
- Listen with an open mind. Refrain from passing judgment on the other person.
- Respect the other person's right to feel the way he/she feels and to think the way he/she thinks, even if the person's viewpoint differs from your own.

Brief Refresher: Speaking

- ❑ Avoid responding in a manner that demonstrates judgment and closes communication (ex. “I don’t believe you did that.”).
- ❑ Ask questions that invite the other person to say more. Asking questions lets the other person know that you are paying attention and are interested in what he/she is saying.
- ❑ Restate the other person’s words/feelings in your own words to ensure that you understood the person correctly. Ask for clarification if needed.

Communication Styles: Impact Everyone & Our Effectiveness in Our Work

How we choose to communicate with colleagues, Veterans, and others (in effect the communication styles that we use) largely influence the outcome of our interactions.

- Are we communicating in a way that meets our needs but is also respectful and ultimately beneficial to both parties in the interaction?
- Are we permitting our own biases (or what we choose to focus on) to interfere with our effectiveness in our communications with others?
- Do we communicate in a way that is negative or derogatory?
- Do we take the needs of others into account while still expressing ourselves freely (expressing ourselves in a way that feels authentic to who we are)?
- Do we communicate in ways that are provocative or incite others with whom we are communicating?
- Do we elicit responses from others that are other than optimal?
 - If so, how? Why?

Types of Communication Styles

Nonproductive

Workplace Communication Styles

- Passive
- Aggressive
- Passive-Aggressive

Productive

Workplace Communication Styles

- Assertive

Nonproductive Style: Passive Communication

Passive Communication: This is a style of communication that does not express the individual's wants, ideas, or feelings. Communicating passively suggests an intent to please others and a posture of "I don't count, only your needs or wants do."

Pros: Avoids unpleasant situations; avoids conflicts, tension, and confrontation.

Cons: Can produce feelings of anxiety, depression, anger, resentment, self-pity; does not get one's own needs met; can lead to low self-esteem, feelings of social isolation and powerlessness.

Example: Ronny is having difficulty trying to submit his expense report for the recent peer specialist conference that he attended. His coworker, Gwen, is near by. Ronny thinks to himself, "I sure wish that I knew what I was doing." Ronny wants help but doesn't know how to ask Gwen. Ronny does not want to be a bother to Gwen or look like he doesn't know what he's doing, so Ronny continues in frustrated silence trying to figure things out for himself.

(Harrington et al., 2011, p. 154-56)

Nonproductive Style: Aggressive Communication

Aggressive Communication: This is a style of communication that expresses the individual's wants, ideas, or feelings but at the expense and possible detriment of others. Communicating aggressively does not take the wants, ideas, or feelings of others into account. This style demonstrates an “all about me” posture.

Pros: Can achieve what the person wants such as feeling justified about getting even with someone; vents anger; and can lead the person to feel superior to others.

Cons: Can feel embarrassed or ashamed later; can lead to poor or damaged relationships; may lead to fights and/or legal issues and also low self-esteem; can result in name calling, humiliation, and even threatening behaviors.

Example: Debbie is a peer specialist experiencing some interpersonal difficulties with a co-worker on her team. She tells her supervisor about the issue. Later, the co-worker approaches Debbie and says, “I should've known you'd be trouble. If you ever go to my supervisor with anything like this again, you and I are going to have issues! Do you understand me?”

(Harrington et al., 2011, p. 155-56)

Nonproductive Style: Passive-Aggressive Communication

Passive-Aggressive Communication: This is a style of communication that expresses the individual's anger in indirect, diffusive ways. Communicating passive-aggressively is misleading as it usually presents as the individual's agreement to what is being shared while the total opposite is really true. Results to this kind of communication are oftentimes roundabout or nonexistent altogether.

Pros: Expresses anger; can lead to feeling satisfaction at getting even with someone.

Cons: Can damage relationships over time; may lead to feelings of guilt; not being honest about feelings which never get expressed.

Example: Dwayne works as a peer specialist with the supported housing program at his VA medical center. Dwayne is having issues with his growing workload. Feeling frustrated, he takes frequent sick days just to regroup, but he continues to grow more and more frustrated over his escalating duties. Dwayne complains to his wife but does not speak to his supervisor about his growing concerns.

(Harrington et al., 2011, p. 155-56)

Productive Style: Assertive Communication

Assertive Communication: This is a style of communication that expresses direct communication of an individual's needs, wants, and opinions without punishing, threatening, or putting down another person. The individual speaks his/her mind without judging or attacking the other person. It involves standing up for one's rights without violating or infringing on the rights of others. "This is what I think, this is what I feel, this is how I see the situation." This communication style leaves room for compromise and cooperation.

Pros: Enables an individual to set appropriate boundaries with others; enables self-care through expression of thoughts/feelings; can lead to healthier self-esteem; contributes to more honest relationships; enables one to receive/give respect.

Cons: Others may not react in a desired way.

Example: Jen is a newly hired peer specialist. She is having trouble with documenting her work in the electronic medical record system (CPRS). Jen talks with her supervisor and expresses her need for help. They set up a time to review guidelines for writing progress notes which takes pressure off of Jen and makes her feel heard, validated, and supported.

(Harrington et al., 2011, p. 156)

Conflict Response Styles

Sometimes, disagreements arise between colleagues and/or between a staff member and a supervisor. There are both nonproductive and productive approaches to how to respond to conflicts with others.

Nonproductive Conflict Response Styles

- Competing Style
- Avoiding Style
- Accommodating Style

Productive Conflict Response Styles

- Compromising Style
- Collaborating Style

Nonproductive Conflict Response Styles

- ❑ Competing Style: “I’m going to win. You’re going to lose.” With this style, the goal here is to win, so people who use this style stress their point of view without considering that of another person. This comes off as being aggressive to others. Most often, it is used when someone fears losing control over a situation or discussion.
- ❑ Avoiding Style: “We’re both going to lose, so I’ll just leave.” With this style, no one wins, and no one’s needs get met. This style can be useful to protect a person from a conflict that cannot be won or to buy time to make a better decision.
- ❑ Accommodating Style: “I’ll just let you win.” With this style, the person gives up his/her concerns in order to satisfy the concerns of others. There is a low level of assertiveness with this conflict response style. The goal is to yield to the other person to keep the relationship intact.

Productive Conflict Response Styles

- ❑ Compromising Style: “We both lose a little and find a compromise.” This style is moderately assertive and cooperative. There is open communication and recognition by both parties about all aspects of the issues involved. However, overuse of this style can lead to the loss of long-term goals and may give a sense that the person makes compromises a lot to please others without really resolving conflict.
- ❑ Collaborating Style: “We can both win.” This style usually leads to satisfying everyone’s needs, ideas, thoughts, concepts. This is a highly assertive and cooperative style that ends in a “win/win” situation.

Whenever possible, try to use a collaborative style to resolve an issue with others.

Conflict Resolution Strategies

- ❑ State your conflict in a clear and precise manner.
- ❑ Pay attention to what is really going on in the situation. What are the facts?
- ❑ Identify any feelings you may have about your conflict.
- ❑ Gather any relevant information about the conflict in which you are involved.
- ❑ Consider any part you have had in the conflict.
 - What was your role in initiating the conflict?
 - What could you have done differently?
 - Remember: Conflict is never just one person's fault. "It takes two to tango."
 - Determine any feelings that you may have attached to your role in the conflict.

Conflict Response Tips

- ❑ THINK before responding: Take time to ask yourself whether your response will “build up,” “maintain,” or “tear down” the relationship. Taking time to think before responding enables you to gain power over the moment/interaction.
- ❑ Don't assume intent: Try your best to not jump to conclusions. Sometimes things simply are not what they seem. Presumption can be destructive and nonproductive.
- ❑ Dig deeper: When possible, try to find out what is really behind someone's anger, frustration, or anxiety. This can help you to be more productive in trying to resolve a situation harmoniously.
- ❑ Cultivate confusion: Approaching a conflictual situation with a posture of confusion can buy you more time in trying to see what is really happening between you and the person or people with whom you are in conflict. “I'm a little confused about this situation. Can you help me understand more about how _____ happened?”
- ❑ The paradox of control: When you attempt to control a situation or person, you end up losing more control than you gain. The goal is not to win but to find a mutually satisfying resolution to the problem.

(Harrington et al., 2011, p. 161-62)

General Tips for Success in Rules of Engagement with Your Colleagues

- ✓ Tip #1: Be dependable and consistent. For example, if you facilitate a peer support group, be sure to start and end your meetings on time. If you cannot facilitate one of the group meetings, it is your responsibility to notify your colleagues in advance and obtain back-up coverage if possible.
- ✓ Tip #2: Attend staff meetings. Even if you do not have an agenda item, be there to listen to the group discussion and share your input with your colleagues.
- ✓ Tip #3: Be creative and help the staff try to solve problems when they arise. For example, if some regular program services need to be cancelled due to other staff member's unavailability, offer to fill in the gap with individual mentoring for Veterans or a peer support group meeting. Helping out when needed is part of being a team player. It also offers you an opportunity to show your colleagues what you can do in your role.
- ✓ Tip #4: Have snippets of your personal recovery story prepared that you can use in an interdisciplinary team meeting discussion to share a recovery perspective and/or advocate on behalf of a Veteran using the program's services.

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Contact for the New England MIRECC Peer Education Center

Patricia Sweeney, Psy.D., CPRP

Education Director of VISN 1 New England MIRECC

Director of New England MIRECC Peer Education Center

Office Telephone: (781) 687-3015

Email: Patricia.Sweeney@va.gov