

Social Skills Orientation for Professionals

What Are Social Skills?

Social skills are the specific behaviors people use when interacting with others that enable individuals to be effective at achieving their personal goals. Situations such as having a casual conversation, making friends, expressing feelings, or obtaining something from another person all require the use of social skills.

What Are Some Examples of Social Skills?

Good social skills include both *what* is said during a social interaction and *how* it is said. When communicating with another person, the verbal content of the message, that is, the person's choice of words or phrases, is important. *How* that message is communicated can be just as important. For example, appropriate facial expressions, body language, eye contact, and a good, firm voice tone all help to communicate the message. Social skills training aims at improving both what people say during interactions and how they say it.

Why Are Social Skills Important?

People with psychiatric illnesses usually experience many problems in their relationships with others, including treatment providers, family members, and other clients. These problems result in difficulties in community adjustment and an impoverished quality of life. For many clients, poor social functioning is related to inadequate social skills. For example, clients may have difficulty starting a conversation, speak in a low monotone voice, or fail to establish eye contact. Helping clients to improve their social skills can enhance their social functioning in the community.

What Are the Causes of Social Skills Deficits?

There are many possible causes of skill deficits in people with psychiatric illnesses. Some clients become ill before they have been able to fully develop their social skills. Others may have grown up in an environment in which they did not have good role models. Still others may have learned good social skills but later lost them as they developed their illness and withdrew from other people. Clients who have spent long periods of time in hospitals where there were few expectations placed on their behavior may be out of practice and need more help relearning skills and knowing when to use them. Any combination of these possibilities can contribute to deficits in social skills.

Are All Problems in Social Functioning Due to Deficits in Social Skills?

No, social dysfunction can arise from other problems as well. Medication side effects can cause problems in social functioning. In addition, if the social environment in which a client resides is not conducive and supportive to appropriate and assertive social behavior, social dysfunction will result.

(continued)

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What is Social Skills Training?

Social skills training is a set of psychotherapeutic techniques based on social learning theory that has been developed to teach social skills to individuals. Social skills training uses the same methods that were developed more than 25 years ago for assertiveness training. Social skills training involves several steps. The first step is to provide a rationale or help the client to understand why it is important to learn the skill. The second step is to demonstrate (model) the skill in a role play. The third step is to engage the client in a role play, and the fourth step involves providing feedback to the client and suggestions for improvement. Fifth, the client is encouraged to practice on his or her own.

How Often Should Social Skills Training Be Conducted?

As often as possible! It is preferable to have the social skills group meet at least two times per week, but clients can be reminded to practice the skills often, even on a daily basis. The more opportunities clients have to practice social skills, the better they get and the more natural the skills become.

What Types of Social Skills Can Be Taught?

A wide variety of skills can be taught, depending on the client's needs. Some of the most common skills include initiating and maintaining conversations, making requests of other people, expressing feelings, resolving conflicts, making friends, and being assertive.

How Can Staff Members Help Clients to Learn These Skills?

Staff members are as important to the success of social skills training as the group leaders themselves. Staff members can help clients by knowing what skills are being taught, demonstrating these skills in their own interactions with clients (and each other), prompting and encouraging clients to use the skills in specific situations, and giving them positive feedback when they demonstrate good social skills. Furthermore, staff members can help clients learn better skills by engaging them in brief role plays conducted *outside* the regular group sessions. This additional practice may help some clients to become more familiar and comfortable with the skills, enabling them to use them on their own. In summary, staff members play a *vital* role in assisting clients to improve their social skills and are an extended part of the social skills training team.