



Non-Verbal Communication in Healthcare

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“The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said”

Peter F. Drucker

Having good communication skills is essential for healthcare to foster healthy doctor-patient relationship and personal satisfaction which in turn can improve adherence to treatment. Improper professional communication can lead to conflicts, distress and medico legal issues.

Non-verbal communication has become an integral part of my life constituting around 70%, after I started to dive deeper to explore new avenues in social media for my professional and personal growth. Thus, exploration into the world of digital communication made me get attracted more to non-verbal communication, which eventually made me to jot down this article which can be practically beneficial for all of us, being in healthcare sectors.

The word Communication originated from the Latin word 'communico' or 'communicare' which means 'to share'. Communication can be defined as transfer of ideas, feelings, messages and information from one person to another. All communication process requires a sender, a channel, a message, a receiver and the feedback that effectively winds up the process.

The 7 Cs of effective communication includes Completeness, Conciseness, Consideration, Clarity, Concreteness, Courtesy and Correctness. The 5 major purpose of communication are to inform, to express feelings, to imagine, to influence, and to meet social expectations.

Effective communication has three basic components- verbal, non-verbal and para verbal. Verbal communication can be written or spoken. Non-verbal component includes body language like posture, gesture, facial expression and spatial distance. Paraverbal component includes tone, pitch, pacing and volume of the voice. While communicating, most of us focus on the verbal component that constitutes only ten percent of the message delivered whereas non-verbal and paraverbal components contribute ninety percent of the total message delivered. The five roles of non-verbal communication include, repetition, contradiction, substitution, complimenting and accenting.

The most important step in communication is active listening. Few non-verbal communications showing active listening which can be practiced by a dental surgeon includes welcoming patients by folding hands, greeting by shaking hands, acknowledging their sorrow or grief by holding their hands and simple gestures like head nodding, sounds like 'hmm', 'aah', 'yes'. All our non-verbal behaviours can send a strong message- the gestures we make, the way we sit, how loud we talk, how fast we talk, how close we stand, how we listen, how much eye contact we maintain, the way we look, the way we react or by the way we move.

Figure 1 illustrates my self-explanatory diagrammatic communication, about the doctor patient positioning and the Seven important nonverbal communication skills as discussed below.

- Eye contact: The way we look can communicate many emotions like interests, affection, hostility, attraction, etc. Good eye contact is essential to build trust. It also built confidence and clarity of the information passed on. Active listening is achieved through a proper eye contact. Humans can pick up wrong eye contacts. Looking at the person above the eye at the level of their forehead denotes 'Aggression'. From the level of eye to the chin region denotes the 'Comfortable zone'. Looking at a person beneath the chin, towards and beneath the neck region is termed as a 'Dirty look' or a 'Lecturer's look'.
- Smile: A pleasing warm smile is a universal language for wellness and positivity. A rude face sends a wrong signal to the distressing patient and they lack trust on the doctor.
- Tone of voice: The way we talk matters a lot. A harsh loud talking to patient definitely blocks the mutual communication channel between patient and doctor as patients avoid disclosing medical illnesses which leads to collusion or conflicts.
- Body position: It is always advised for the doctor to be seated along with the patient at the same eye contact level to facilitate good communication and active listening. A standing doctor communicating to a patient postured as sitting or supine induces medical fear to the patients and also sends a superiority or a paternalistic signal to them. Thus, patients might not feel comfortable in building a healthy relationship with doctors. Combating this barrier is highly effective in mutual trust.
- Body posture: When a paediatric visit us, they carry an innate fear and anxiety which shoots up when we talk in a rigid, harsh manner by standing tall in front of the kid. This escalates the anxiety for the kid and it's difficult to get their cooperation throughout the procedure. Rather, making the child comfortably sit near us with a good eye contact or kneeling down to them to their eye contact level is the ideal paediatric posture during communication.
- Space: Maintaining our position at the public space is decency and ethical too. Standing too close to the patient within 2 feet distance at the intimate space should be avoided at the dental office.
- Touch: Human touch is a miracle. Touch includes a grab, patting, or a simple touch. A good touch at patient's palms or back of the hands, a hug, a reassurance at back, etc can act as healers them especially when we plan for dental sessions for breaking the bad news or while addressing grief.

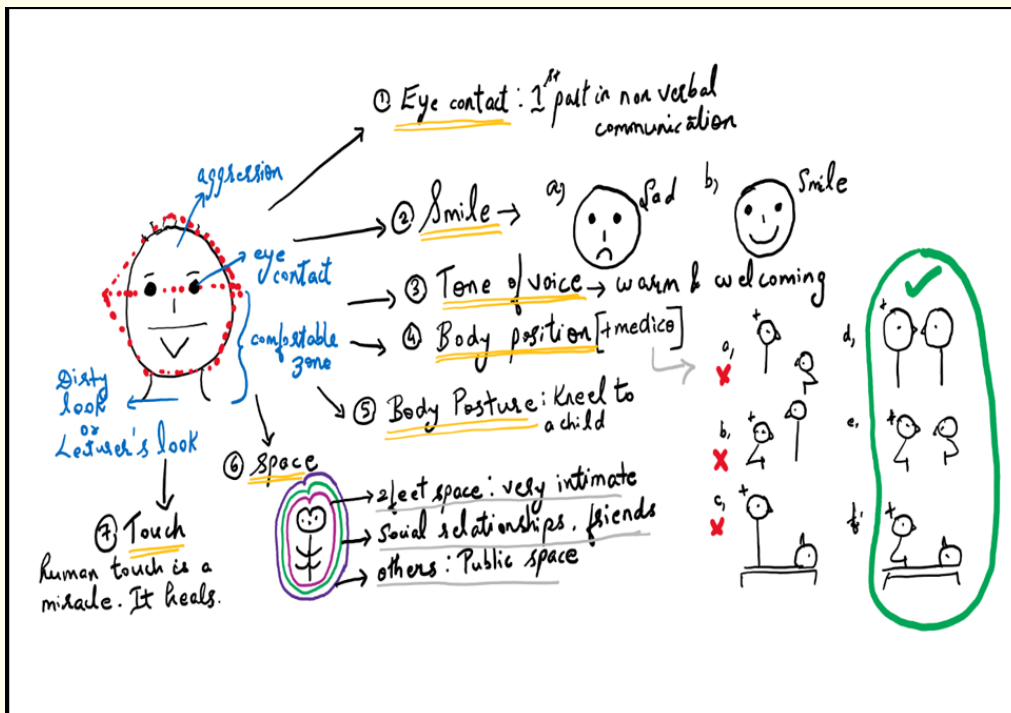


Figure 1: Diagrammatic self-explanatory cartoon images depicting the importance of non-verbal communication.

Communication skills is the Need of the hour for a healthcare professional, as we interact with new people on a day-to-day basis. Good communication skills among doctors enhances diagnostic capability, helps in therapeutic success, decreases work stress, creates a conducive environment and increase job satisfaction due to less paternalistic attitude and building of harmonious relationships. Not many doctors are naturally blessed to have good communication skills and there is necessity of formal training. I personally feel that, when the Doctor have an innate personality trait infused with honesty, genuine care, compassion, kindness and empathy towards our society, the skill of communication is a cake walk as such souls do not harm with words or actions and offer holistic attention focussing to improve the overall quality of life of patients.