



Session 5

Embracing Diversity

Purpose

The purpose of this session is to demonstrate ways to share life experiences with those different from us, and to build the relationships necessary for creating an inclusive community. *Embracing Diversity*, therefore, requires you to focus on connecting with people *one-on-one*. Regardless of belonging to the same social group or not, each one of us is unique. If we are to truly respect this uniqueness – to value diversity – effective communication is essential.

Agenda

1. Debrief independent learning assignment
2. Activity: *Follow My Directions*
3. Tools for building empathy
 - a. Skillful listening
 - b. Understanding defense mechanisms
 - c. Reducing defensive behavior
4. Tools for changing behavior
 - a. Your own behavior: How to receive criticism
 - b. Other's behavior: How to give criticism
 - c. Interrupting offensive statements
5. Activity: *A Reconciliation Experience*
6. Independent learning assignment
7. Participants' evaluations

Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy and mutual valuing.

— Rollo May
U.S. psychologist,
existentialist and
clergyman (1909-1994)

Learning objectives

- Increase our ability to empathize.
- Recognize defense mechanisms that interfere with our ability to build relationships.
- Practice communication that reduces defensiveness in others.
- Learn how to receive criticism.
- Learn how to interrupt offensive remarks and behavior.
- Experience positive effects of reconciliation.

1. Debrief independent learning assignment

2. Activity: Follow My Directions

3. Tools for building empathy

Empathy is a deep understanding of feelings, thoughts and motives of another person. If we can increase our ability to empathize with others, we decrease our tendencies to discount their experiences, to prejudge them, or to stereotype people.

3a. Skillful listening

Learning to listen skillfully is a first step to developing empathy. Believe it or not, listening is active, not passive. Research shows that listening brings about positive changes in a person's attitudes and self-confidence; it also helps strengthen his or her value system.

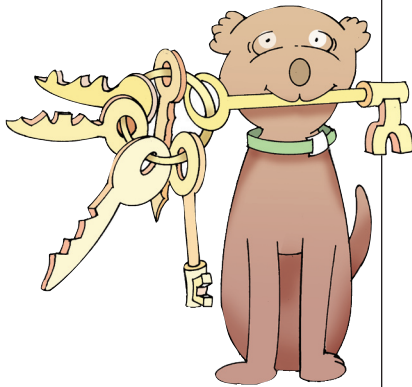
A skilled listener takes in information from others while remaining non-judgmental. A skilled listener responds to the speaker in a way that invites and encourages the speaker to continue communicating.

Six keys to skillful listening

1. Be attentive. Be alert and don't get distracted. Create a positive, interested atmosphere with your nonverbal behavior.
2. Be interested in the other person's experience and his or her needs. Be sure to let the other person know you care about what is happening.
3. Listen from an "okay" mode. Be a sounding board. Be nonjudgmental. Don't "grill" the speaker by asking questions. Act like a mirror to help the person think and reflect more clearly. Don't use placating phrases such as, "You'll feel better tomorrow" or "It really isn't that bad."
4. Stay centered. Don't get angry, upset or argumentative. Don't jump to conclusions or make judgments.
5. Invite the speaker to say more. Give encouraging acknowledgments by nodding or telling him or her, "I'd like to hear more about that"
6. When you use good listening skills, you DON'T do the following:
 - Interrupt
 - Change the subject
 - Rehearse in your own mind what you want to say
 - Interrogate
 - Preach or lecture
 - Give advice

Activity: Practice Skillful Listening

Directions: Pair up with the supporting partner you selected when you made your *Commitment Pledge* in Session 4. Take turns describing how you fulfilled your short-term commitment since the last session. Demonstrate skillful listening by following the six key points presented here. After listening, are you able to summarize your partner's commitment pledge and how he or she fulfilled it?



Listening is an attitude of the heart, a genuine desire to be with another, which both attracts and heals.
— J. Isham

3b. Understanding defense mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are what people do to cope with feelings of inadequacy when they feel attacked. Most people want to be viewed as good individuals doing the right thing. When confronted with criticism or disapproval, people look for ways to “save face.” To a certain extent, protecting our public image is natural. We use defense mechanisms to help us come to terms with difficult situations. Constant use of defense mechanisms, however, can damage relationships and keep us from focusing on what’s really going on.

Read through this list and think of your own examples of defense mechanisms.

- **Rationalization** – Coming up with a logical explanation for doing something, but that logical explanation isn’t really the reason for doing it. Example: When she lost the election for alderman, the candidate said, “That’s okay, I ran just because I wanted to give the people a choice. I didn’t really want to hold public office.” Or, when Linda who is Caucasian, didn’t get the job, she said, “Well, they had to hire an African-American.”
- **Compensation** – Focus on a positive aspect instead of acknowledging the problem. Example: The mayor held a town hall meeting to discuss the recent surge in car thefts. Very few people showed up. The mayor’s comment was, “Well, I guess that means people are happy about the way I am running the city.”
- **Reaction formation** – Act the opposite of how you feel. Bettina, a board member of a domestic violence shelter for women, made a motion at a board meeting to allow mothers to bring their male children up to the age of 14 with them to the shelter. The motion was defeated. Bettina was upset, but said, “That’s okay, majority rules.”
- **Projection** – Attribute something you don’t like in yourself to someone else. Example: Mom and dad are divorced and their 16-year-old son spends time on weekends at dad’s. Lately the son doesn’t want to go to dad’s house. Mom, who has issues with dad, suggests that the son doesn’t like his dad. In fact, son just wants to spend time with his friends on the weekend. (*Raise a question about African-Americans using the “n-word” with each other. Is this an example of projection?*)
- **Identification** – Hide your uncertainties by acting the way you know you are supposed to. Example: The executive director has to give a financial report to his board. He does not want them to know how close they are to closing the doors of the organization so he reassures the board that “things will be all right.” (*Is a Caucasian person who acts as if he or she gets along with African-Americans but really feels uncomfortable around them an example of identification?*)
- **Fantasy** – Escape into a dream world. Example: Ralph hates his job. He spends most of his daydreaming about retirement.
- **Repression** – Deny the existence of a problem. Example: Jed side-swiped his neighbor’s car when he came home from a late night of drinking. The neighbor knew that Jed often drank and wanted him to enter into a program. He offered not to report the accident if Jed agreed. Jed told his neighbor he did not have a drinking problem and could “go ahead and report whatever you want.” (*If someone has an*

“attitude” and when you call it to their attention they deny that they act angry and superior, is this repression?)

- **Dependency** – Look to others to solve your problems. Example: Mayberry Neighborhood Association had a very strong president. The president helped increase membership and activate committees. One of the committee chairs agreed to serve so long as the president would help out. Every time there was a meeting, the committee chair called to ask the president to attend and lead the committee meeting. When the committee planned a barbecue fundraiser and one of the cooks couldn't make it because of illness, the committee chair called the president to find out what to do. The committee chair never initiated anything without first checking with the president. *(Did the government create dependency among Native Americans when they funded reservations?)*
- **Apathy** – Avoid getting hurt by distancing yourself emotionally. Example: After my candidate lost in the last election, I decided not to vote any more because, “It just doesn't make a difference anyway.” *(Are Caucasians apathetic about race because they feel guilty and don't know what to do?)*
- **Displacement** – Vent angry feelings against someone who is not at fault. Example: A supervisor comments to his office manager that when he called in for messages yesterday before closing, no one answered the phone. The office manager knew the secretary had left early that day for a doctor's appointment and because the office manager had been the only one there and was too busy to answer calls, she had switched the answering machine on. The office manager said nothing about this to the supervisor, but went to the secretary and told her that from now on she couldn't leave early no matter what. Or, mom has a hard day at work. She has to buy groceries on the way home. She rushes to get dinner on the table. When her daughter whines about being hungry, she slaps her in the face.
- **Denial** – Minimizing an offense; make up for something you did wrong with a *token* apology. Example: Two neighbors aren't getting along. One claims that on many occasions he has seen the other's dog use his yard for a toilet. The dog owner questions whether it is really his dog, suggesting there are a number of dogs that go on his yard. He ends the conversation with, “If it is my dog, I am sorry, but there is really nothing I can do. You know, when nature calls . . .” Or, when an African-American brings up the subject of reparations, the response is, “Don't blame me, I never owned any slaves!”
- **Verbal aggression** – Drown out criticism by becoming angry and launching a counterattack. Example: When a security officer told a group of teenagers they could not loiter at the mall, they told him to “Go give a ticket to someone who is really doing something wrong!”

Workbook activity: My own defense mechanisms

From the previous examples, do you recognize any defense mechanisms you have used in the past?

Identify the defense mechanism: _____

Identify how you acted in that situation: _____

Identify what you were really thinking or feeling at the time: _____

Identify what you think now: _____



3c. Reducing defensive behavior

Jack Gibb, a management consultant who has published widely on organizational development, group dynamics and communication, identified types of behavior that tend to make others defensive. When someone becomes defensive, he or she shuts down receptivity to new or different ideas and digs in to guard or defend what he or she already believes. In contrast, there are ways to reduce defensiveness so that people are more likely to be receptive to new or different ideas. One tool to help us get along better is learning to communicate in ways that reduce defensiveness on the part of others.

In other words, we need to learn to express a supportive attitude or show supportive behavior instead of communicating in a way that causes defensiveness.

<i>Behaviors that cause defensiveness</i>	<i>Behaviors that reduce defensiveness</i>
Evaluation	Description
Control	Problem sharing
Indifference	Empathy
Superiority	Equality
Certainty	Openness
Strategy	Spontaneity
Ignoring the issue	Acknowledgement

At a personal level, our best bet for getting others to open their minds is to decrease their sense of being attacked.

Communicating support instead of communicating in a way that makes a person feel defensive might be a new concept. To become more familiar with the difference between the two styles of communication, read the sample statements below. The first statement illustrates communication that makes the person feel defensive. The second statement identifies the same concern but communicates support for the person.

Evaluation (increases defensiveness) – Judging or criticizing the person rather than the person’s specific statement or action to which you object. ***What did you go and do a stupid thing like that for!***

Description (reduces defensiveness) – Providing a concrete example of the behavior causing concern. ***Asking a complicated question right before the meeting adjourned was sure to make us run overtime.***

Control (increases defensiveness) – Telling others what to do or how to do it, rather than asking others to help find a solution. ***You have to get the minutes typed up and mailed by tomorrow.***

Problem sharing (decreases defensiveness) – Lets the person know you appreciate the difficulty of the task but still expect it to be accomplished by explaining how important it is. ***It will help the board members if they have the minutes as soon as possible. Is it possible for you to get the minutes out by tomorrow?***

Indifference (increases defensiveness) – An attitude of detachment, neutrality or lack of concern for others, rather than making an effort to see things from someone else’s perspective and to accept their feelings. *So what? What do you care anyway?* (cool, uncaring)

Empathy (decreases defensiveness) – Tapping into and affirming your understanding of how the person feels. *I can see what happened really upset you.* (understanding, warm)

Superiority (increases defensiveness) – Conveying an attitude of being better (smarter, richer, prettier, more important) than others, rather than affirming the special worth of each person. *Well, if you had just done it like I told you . . . (arrogance)*

Equality (decreases defensiveness) – Recognizing we all do the best we can do under the circumstances – the two people conversing are equals; one is not better than or smarter than the other. *I probably would have done that too.* (respectful)

Certainty (increases defensiveness) – Dogmatically knowing “the one right way to do things” rather than considering other possible ways that might also be acceptable. *This is the way we do things here.*

Openness (decreases defensiveness) – Willing to consider different ways and viewpoints. *I’m interested in how you organize block parties.*

Strategy (increases defensiveness) – Manipulating someone into doing something for you, rather than being forthright about what you want. *Don’t you need to do the laundry?*

Spontaneity (decreases defensiveness) – Coming up without premeditation. *My blouse is dirty and I was hoping you were planning to run a load of wash.*

Ignore (increases defensiveness) – Disregarding another’s contributions or changing the subject, rather than reacting directly to the person and acknowledging them. *Oh, that’s a good idea, but we decided to do it this way.* (switch topics or talk over the other person’s head)

Acknowledgment (decreases defensiveness) – Affirm and recognize the person and his or her experience. *That’s a good idea. How would you do this?* (build on the experience and input of the other person)



Workbook activity: Practice a communication style that reduces defensiveness.

Think of a recent incident when you were not using supportive communication. Pair up with another participant. Write your responses to the questions below and then discuss the pros and cons of these responses with your partner. Discuss how you could have responded more supportively.

My actual response: _____

The other person's reaction to how I acted: _____

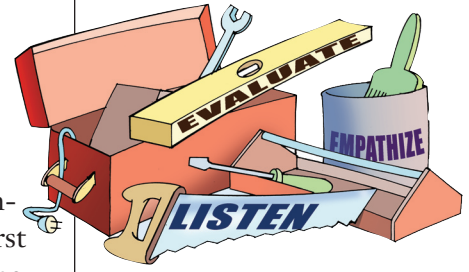
A way I could have responded to reduce the other person's defensiveness:

4. Tools for changing behavior

4a. Your own behavior: How to receive criticism

What if the situation is reversed? You have just learned how to be supportive of others, but what if someone who is guarded and unsupportive approaches you with criticism or negative feedback? Will you become defensive? It is perfectly natural to feel threatened and become defensive: Your first reaction is likely to be defensive: “I did not.” Or, “Everyone else did the same thing.” Is that the most effective reaction?

Instead of denying the criticism automatically, or immediately making an excuse, control your own defensive behavior by following these tips.



Tips for controlling your own defensiveness

First, listen carefully.

- Don't interrupt or try to stop the person from talking.
- Consciously slow down your reaction.
- Take a few seconds to think about what the person has just said. Do you understand why the person said it?
- Ask for specifics if the criticism is general. “Can you tell me what I did that makes you say that about me?”
- Let the other person know that you listened to them and understood what they said. (That does not mean you necessarily agree with what they said.)
- Paraphrase the person's critical remarks in your own words to make sure you understand their remarks and to make sure they understand how you are interpreting what they said.

Then, evaluate the criticism by asking yourself these questions:

- Am I being asked to change something I am capable of changing?
- Am I willing to work at changing?
- What is true about what the person said to me? What isn't true?
- What are the consequences of changing and not changing?
- Empathize by putting yourself in the other person's shoes. “I can see how that would upset you.”
- Ask what they would prefer to happen in the future. Is there something you could do differently next time?
- If you are not sure you can follow through with their suggestions, or that their suggestion is the best idea, ask for time to think about it.
- Apologize if appropriate.
- If you disagree with the criticism, explain the situation as you see it.
- Use a problem-solving approach: “How can we resolve this?”

Following these guidelines is difficult. It takes courage and confidence to respond to criticism without getting “hooked” or defensive. Practicing with a friend or colleague helps.



Activity: Responding to Criticism

Instructions: One person starts by sharing one of his or her weaknesses with the partner. The partner will *role play* the situation by confronting you with criticism about your behavior. Respond by using the tips presented on how to receive criticism. Switch roles so that each person has the opportunity to practice responding to criticism. When each person has finished, share your reactions to the activity with the whole group.

One of my weaknesses that I think might bother people is _____

If someone criticized me about this behavior, I would respond by saying: ___

4b. Changing other's behavior: How to give criticism

When you are concerned about someone's behavior, there are three possibilities: Change *their* behavior. Change *your* behavior. Or, change the situation. Changing someone else's behavior is more difficult than the other two. You have the most control over your own behavior, so if someone is bothering you, a common response is to ignore them, or convince yourself not to let their behavior bother you. You've changed yourself as a way of coping with something someone is doing that you don't like.

Another option is to change the situation. If my neighbor blasts his boom box late at night and I want to change the situation, I might close my window or move my bed to another part of the house. In another example, if I can't get along with my co-worker, I can change the situation by quitting my job.

What if you don't want to quit your job, though? Isn't it worthwhile to address your co-worker about whatever it is that is bothering you? How would you do that without coming across as aggressive or overly critical? Here is a way to approach a person who is doing something that concerns you. This way of confronting someone is designed to be strong enough to get your point across, but not so strong that the person feels verbally attacked.

Tips for asserting your concerns

Think ahead

- Before you even approach the other person, in your own mind be clear about exactly what the person is doing that is troublesome.
- Also identify how that behavior has a negative impact on your life. (If it doesn't directly bother you, why are you concerned?)
- Have an idea of what the other person could do differently. What would you like them to do instead?
- With a better understanding after thinking about the person's behavior, how it negatively affects you, and possibilities for improvement, find a good time and place (preferably when no one is rushed and there aren't any other people around) to discuss the problem.

Approach the other person

- Request that the person discuss the matter with you.
- If the present time is not convenient or appropriate, arrange a time when the two of you can talk.

The conversation

- State your concerns by describing the behavior that bothers you using one example. (Avoid generalizations like "You always . . ." or "You never . . .")
- Explain how the person's behavior affects your life. (Generally people object to what someone else is doing because it affects their sense of well-being, causes them to waste time or spend extra money, or it's posing a danger to health or safety. For example, "When you play your radio loud late at night, I can't sleep and my health suffers.")
- Listen and acknowledge the other person's response. (It's bound to be defensive. That's okay. It's only natural to defend yourself when someone criticizes or objects to something you are doing.) Listen skillfully, acknowledging that the response may include some valid points.
- Ask the other person how he or she might work it out so you are not bothered or upset by what he or she is doing. The person may come up with the very same idea you have. If not, and what the person says probably won't work for you, offer your suggestions.
- Continue the "give and take" discussion until you have reached a solution you both find acceptable.

These tips for asserting your concerns follow a sequence. It won't work if you start by suggesting what you want the other person to do, or if you haven't even clarified in your own mind what it is that bothers you.



Workbook activity: Asserting your concerns

Practice what you would say to someone who is bothering you. Think of a situation when you have been bothered by what someone is doing.

What is the behavior that bothers you? _____

What negative impact does that person's behavior have on your life? _____

What would you say to the person to let him or her know about your concerns? _____

What might be a solution? _____

4c. Interrupting offensive statements

Some statements – prejudiced remarks, offensive ethnic jokes and racial insults – go too far. If left unchecked, the perpetrator might think that this type of communication is acceptable, and it's not.

There are no “cookbook” strategies for confronting such remarks. You might find two techniques useful. The first is called “*I-Messages*” and the second suggests *Tips for interrupting offensive statements*.

“I-Messages” are a way of communicating that allows you to take ownership of your concerns, while at the same clearly identifies the problem you want fixed. Note the difference in these two statements:

“I don't like it when you talk to me like that.”

“You shouldn't talk like that.”

Which statement will make the greater impact on the other person? Paradoxically, by taking ownership of your own feelings about what is happening, the other person has less opportunity to deny or avoid it.

How to formulate “I-Messages”

Identify how you are feeling about the situation: I am _____

Identify the problem: I am _____

when _____

Example: “I am uncomfortable when you tell jokes like that.”

Not: “You sound so crude when you tell those stories.”

I-Messages are useful when you want to make a clear statement about your “boundaries.” Saying “I don't like it when you do that” is sufficient in most circumstances to put a stop to offensive behavior. Here are some other tips when people go too far.

Tips for interrupting offensive statements

If you are in a private conversation:

- Don't laugh at the joke or slur.
- If you know the person, calmly explain how you feel about the remarks – why you object.
- If the person dismisses your objection, be willing to continue the discussion. Listen to what the other person's view is, yet remain clear in your belief that this remark is offensive.

In a group setting or meeting:

- If the remark or action is particularly outrageous, be prepared to register your reaction there and then. You can state your disagreement openly without confronting the person directly.
- Afterward, you might have the opportunity to take the person aside, out of the public setting, and explain why you felt offended.

Sometimes saying less is more effective. For example, a social worker was invited to work with the neighborhood association on a community clean air project in an area of the city that was considered “the wrong side of the



tracks.” The population was low-income and predominantly African-American. When she went to the neighborhood for the first time, she was surprised that it didn’t look like a distressed area and said to the president of the association, “This neighborhood isn’t so bad.” The president smiled and said, “You were expecting something different?” That’s all he said, but his lesson stayed with her. She knew she made an assumption about the neighborhood without ever having been there. With a smile and a question, the association president had conveyed a powerful message and made a long-lasting impression. Yet his demeanor remained courteous, so the president’s and social worker’s relationship remained intact.

Workbook activity

Do you have an example of when you heard an ethnic slur or other type of offensive remark?

If so, how did you respond? _____

After learning about the tools and tips in this session, would you respond to the this remark differently now? _____

Now, I would respond by saying (or doing): _____



Setting an example is not the main means of influencing others.

It is the only means.

— Albert Einstein

U.S. (German-born) physicist (1879-1955)

5. Workbook activity

After the activity *A Reconciliation Experience*, if you have additional thoughts or reactions, write down your responses.

Describe your reaction to the *Reconciliation* activity.



How do you feel about people who suffer harm and are able to go on with a positive attitude? _____

Why would forgiveness be a benefit to the person harmed and not just the person who did the harm? _____



Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it stands than to anything on which it is poured.

— *Anonymous (reprinted in Ann Landers' column)*

6. Independent learning assignment

If there is an appropriate time to be supportive with another individual or a group, apply the skills you learned in *Session 5: Embracing Diversity*. Make a conscious note about what kind of impact your supportive behavior had. How did the other person respond?

7. Participants' evaluations