

Tip #95 The Power of Reflecting

You can't fake listening.

It shows.

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Communication is never perfect. We **guess our client's meaning** all the time, and this is normal in human interaction. By reflecting what we hear, we take more care with the communication and at the same time provide a powerful boost to the client. This essential process of reflective listening is also called mirroring or just reflecting.

Reflecting involves **listening** carefully for what sounds important and **reflecting** it back in your own words. You are making a guess about what you believe the person means and reflecting it back as a statement. It's so simple and yet so powerful. In Tip #6, Mirroring, I discuss the functions of reflecting and give examples. Here we explore types of reflections and provide more detail on how to make them most effective.

Brain research shows us that **we all naturally mirror** in our brains when in the presence of other people who are doing or experiencing something familiar to us. In order for this to be useful to the client it needs to happen out loud. Humans naturally mirror on lots of levels. You can train yourself to add the ones you don't do already.

You can reflect:

- **Body language:** We tend to mirror the body language of people we are talking with. You can do this deliberately to encourage rapport.
- **Tone of voice:** This also supports rapport and goes further to tell the client you are attending to her.
- **A phrase:** You can highlight important statements you hear by reflecting just the important words. "...care about your kids..." "...this annoying condition..."
- **One word:** You can even do it with one key word: "kidneys," "tired."
- **An emotion:** When reflecting emotions, it is best to err on the side of understating the intensity of the emotion. For example, a client sounds angry. If you reflect strongly, "You were very angry at him for taking away your plate," you will likely get an argument from the client. When you reflect, "You were annoyed with him for taking away your plate," the client is more apt to simply elaborate and continue.
- **A whole concept or process:** "You find that when you get home from work and didn't have an afternoon snack, you are more apt to eat something unhealthy at dinner."

Types of reflections:

- **Simple:** Here you are simply choosing to repeat back what the client has said, though maybe in slightly different words.
- **Double-sided:** You reflect both sides of the client's ambivalence. (See Tip #55, Ambivalence)
- **Reflection with a reframe:** By your word choice, you offer to reframe how the client is approaching a situation. (See Tip #10, Reframing)
- **Reflection with a twist:** You can choose to reflect what has been said and then continue the thought just a bit.
- **Summary:** You reflect back a whole paragraph of what you have been hearing. (See Tip #72, Summarizing)

Here is an example. The client has said these statements in one section of a session: "I love walking." "I know it would be good for my blood pressure." "I don't have enough time." "I prefer to do it with other people."

Simple reflections: "You like walking." Or "You know walking would help bring your blood pressure down."

Double-sided: "On the one hand you like walking and know it's good for you and on the other, you don't like doing it alone and have trouble finding time for it."

Reframe: "You're a walker."

Twist: "You like walking and haven't *yet* found a way to fit it in." Or "You know walking would be a good idea and are considering ways to make it a habit."

Summary: "So if I understand you so far, you know that walking more would be a good idea for your blood pressure and you have always liked walking with others. At this point you're thinking about how to work it back into your life."

Powerful reflections are **statements, not questions**. It is tempting to turn a reflection into a question by raising the inflection at the end. This weakens it and can turn it into a closed question. For example: Notice the difference between "You are an all-or-nothing kind of person?" And "You are an all-or-nothing kind of person."

A question demands an answer, and this will interrupt the client's flow. The rare times when your reflection statement is significantly off, the client will correct you. So there is no need to turn your reflections into questions.

When to reflect:

- **After an open-ended question**, a reflection keeps the exploration process going that you started with your question. This encourages the client to do more work in the session. (See Tip #60, Open and Closed Questions)
- When the **client is thinking about change**. People talk about changing before they do it, and the more they talk about it in specific ways the more apt they are to change. So when you hear this “change talk,” reflect it. This puts a spotlight on it and elicits more of it. The client will hear her own motivations and plans at least twice. (More on Change Talk in Tip #69)
- Part of your job is to help clients see that they are ambivalent, and you do that by reflecting it **when you hear ambivalence**. Then you can offer to explore it further with them. (See Tip #55, Ambivalence)
- **When you hear a strong feeling**, you *might* choose to reflect it: If the feeling is directly related to food behaviors, it may be appropriate to simply reflect it and explore a bit more. If, on the other hand, the emotion seems tangential and getting in the way of the session, you want the client to contain it and bring it up elsewhere. In this case, you might instead say, “This sounds important. Do you have someone to discuss this with?”
- **When you sense resistance**: For example, you hear “yes, buts” and complaints. The most effective thing to do with resistance is to roll with it. You do this by reflecting what you hear. For example, “You don’t like spinach” or “Cooking isn’t fun for you” or “You don’t like your doctor’s advice.”
- As you finish discussing one topic and at the **end of the session**, offer a summary that reflects what you have heard from the client matters to her and what she plans to do.

We all naturally mirror in our brains. There is great variability in the extent to which we do it out loud. **Observe** what types of visible/verbal reflecting you already do naturally and well. Find ways to **reflect more powerfully**.