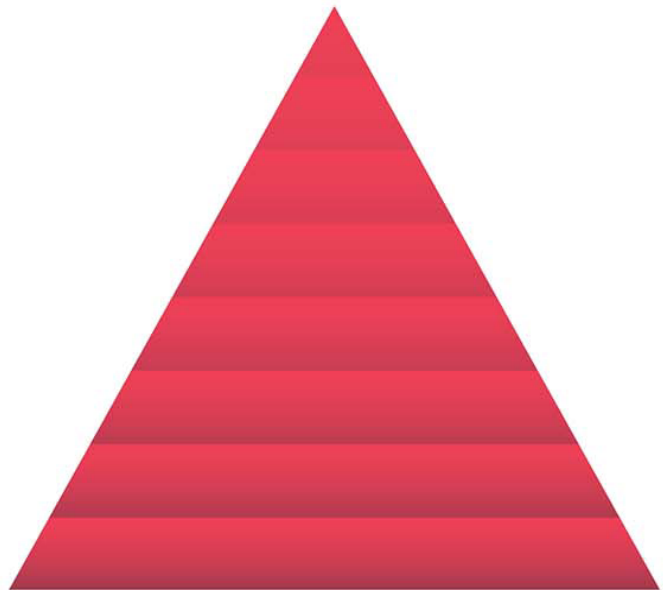


# Basic Attending Skills

**Foundations of Empathic Relationships  
and Problem Solving**

Sixth Edition

**Allen E. Ivey**  
**Norma Gluckstern Packard**  
**Mary Bradford Ivey**



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**AND PROBLEM SOLVING**

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*The first thing I'd say... is ... 'Listen'. It's the second thing I'd say too, and the third, and the fourth.... And if you do people will talk. They'll always talk. Why? Because no one has ever listened to them before in all their lives. Perhaps they've not ever even listened to themselves.*

Studs Terkel, Author, Pulitzer Prize Winner

## WELCOME: WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM THIS BOOK

*Basic Attending Skills* presents the necessary and essential skills of interviewing, counseling, and psychotherapy. These same listening skills are also foundations of effective and meaningful interpersonal communication in couples and families. They are connecting glue in medical diagnosis and treatment, in skilled business management, legal work, and in all professions and settings where we find people talking to one another.

These are the original videobased communication skills that have become the international standard, based on over 500 data-based studies. You'll find medical schools, AIDS workers in Africa, Aboriginal social workers in Australia, and those helping disaster survivors of fire, floods, war-caused displacement and trauma using listening skills as steps toward health and survival. Translated into at least 20 languages, the skills of this book have gradually entered as the standard.

But, what does this mean for you? Paradoxically, these now well-known dimensions of human communication are ultimately clear and easy to learn. You will grasp them and their basic essence and importance quickly. But, do not be deceived for, although easily understandable, the real test is your ability to use listening skills in the *real world* on a daily basis in interviewing and counseling, and in communication with others throughout the day.

And, individuals, their life experience and multicultural background differ. Do not expect your natural style of listening to be equally effective with all. Be prepared to adapt and change your mode of listening with each unique individual and with special attention to multicultural differences which include many factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, socioeconomic background, spirituality, and even region/area of a state or nation.

Thus, practice of these listening skills to full mastery is required. For example, the four major components of "attending behavior" are culturally appropriate eye contact, verbal following, vocal tone, and body language. These are easy to remember, but far more difficult in practice if you are to consistently reach others. Most effective in the early stages is video-based practice with feedback from others on your performance. It really takes more than one try or demonstration to achieve

competence. Some fully trained professionals in psychology and psychiatry still have not mastered these basics as they move on to sophisticated theoretical systems of therapy. And, without full competence in listening skills, they can be less helpful than a caring beginner.

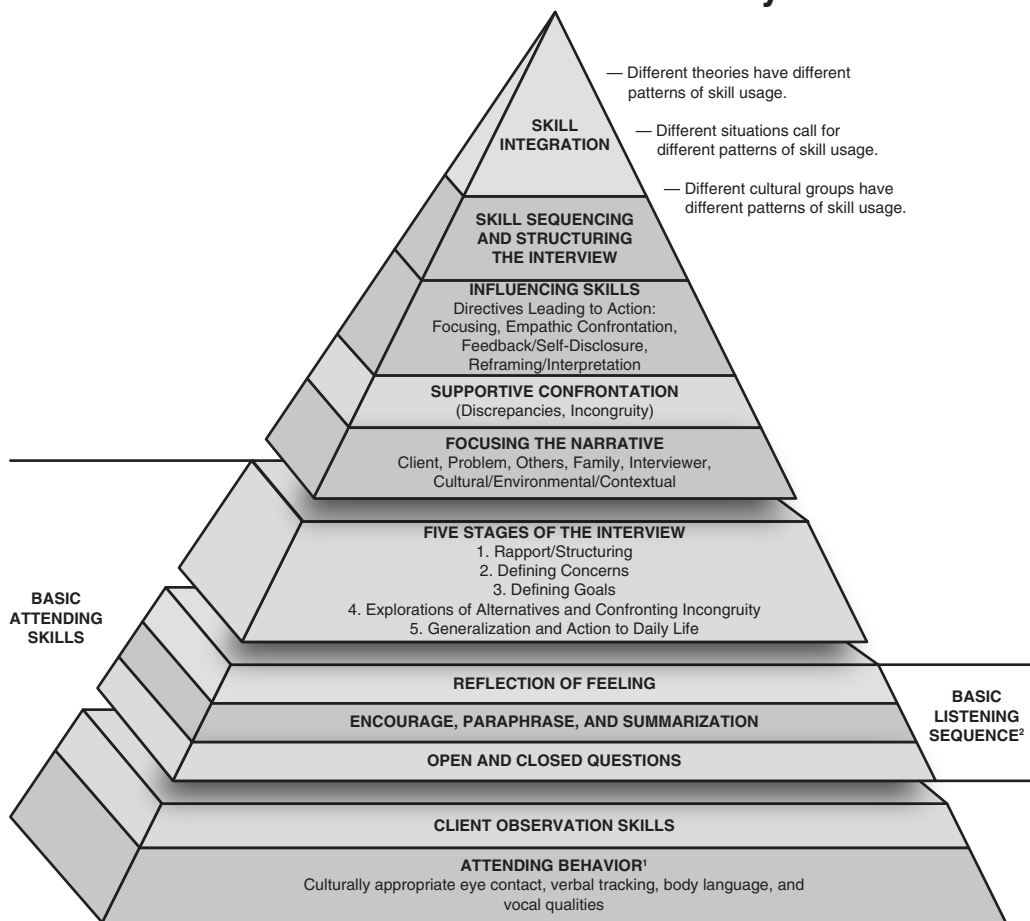
The Microskills Hierarchy below shows you the sequence of listening skills of this book. Note the Basic Listening Sequence. These are the skills of sophisticated listening and caring: attending behavior, questioning, paraphrasing, including the encourage and restatement, reflection of feeling, and summarization. These are all essential skills of the helping relationship.

There is a second book available, *Basic Influencing Skills*, one which outlines the influencing skills enabling effective focusing and supportive confrontation. These two are followed by directives and assisting client decisions, feedback and self-disclosure, and reframing/interpretation. Each of the influencing skills needs to be based on effective and competent listening skills.

So, here is your chance to become an effective counselor, an effective communicator, and eventually one who will make a significant difference in the lives of others.

*Practice, always practice, and become a master listener. Then once you have become expert, practice even more!*

## The Microskills Hierarchy



1. Attending behavior and client observation skills form the foundation of effective communication, but are not always the appropriate place to begin training.
2. The basic listening sequence of attending skills (open and closed questions, encouraging, paraphrasing, reflection of feeling, and summarization) is often found in effective interviewing, management, social work, physician diagnostic sessions, and many other settings.

**FIGURE 1.** The Microskills Hierarchy. Copyright 2015, 2018 Allen E. Ivey, 8877 Bloomfield Blvd, Sarasota, FL 34238



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*Listening is love.*

Paul Tillich, Philosopher and Theologian

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## CHAPTER 1

### BASIC ATTENDING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

*Basic Attending Skills* is designed to provide you with a fundamental understanding and competence in the most important skills of helping, counseling, and therapy. Attending and listening skills provide a means for you to make contact with your clients and to hear them accurately. These skills are basic to *empathy*, the ability to be sensitive to and understand the world of another human being.

Many of us are tempted to provide immediate advice and suggestions to those who come to us with a troubling concern. We give them useful suggestions, only to find ourselves disappointed and surprised when our good ideas are ignored. This book is not necessarily opposed to advice, but many people can resolve their concerns and life challenges, if we simply listen to them carefully. Advice may not be needed!

Moreover, it is important to remember that client issues are often developed over a period of time and may be more complex than we originally thought. Doesn't it make good sense just to stop for a while and hear clients out fully before we move to suggesting what can be done?

Let's test out the importance of listening in terms of your own life experience. Please think back on a time when someone listened to you and was truly helpful. If you can, seek to obtain an image of the helping situation and recall what you saw, heard, and felt. And, thinking back to that helpful time, reflect on what that person did to be helpful. This may help you connect personally with the value and power of really listening. Use the following lines for your recollections.

How does it feel to have someone truly listen to you?

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## BASIC ATTENDING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

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What specifically did the listener *do* that helped?

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The central maxim of this book and the helping process could be summarized as:

*Listen, listen, listen, and then listen some more  
before taking action or giving advice.*

If you listen to and attend to others, many times they can resolve issues on their own. This book and training program is concerned with the resilience and growth potential that is in every client, or person. Listening and enabling them to find their strengths is basic to the helping process. We now know that your relationship with a client represents 30% of factors determining a successful interview. An empathic relationship is often defined as one in which you and the client are in synchrony. You are able to “be with” the other person sensing and understanding their thoughts and feelings. But there is a difference—*you are you and they are they*. An empathic relationship is also called a *working alliance*. You and the client work together, focusing and their goals, wishes, and aspirations.

### WHAT ARE THE BASIC ATTENDING SKILLS?

There are six major skill areas of listening in this book. A brief definition of each and its major function in the interview follows:

#### Definition and Function in the Interview

Attending Behavior	Individually and culturally appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior in the interview is central to the helping process—culturally appropriate eye contact, vocal tone, body language, and verbal following. This demonstrates that you are listening and encourages the client to talk more freely.
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## BASIC ATTENDING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

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Questions/Open Invitation to Talk	Open questions often begin with <i>what, how, or could</i> . They help the client explore issues and talk at greater length. Closed questions often begin with <i>do, is, are</i> and lead to focused answers, often shorter in length. While questions bring out client stories and issues in more detail, be careful. Too many of them may put off the client and make them defensive.
Clarifying	
—Encourage	Encourages are brief responses such as head nods, “uh-huh,” and single words or phrases. They encourage client depth exploration and bring clarity as to meaning. Appropriate smiling is one of the most important encouragements.
—Restatement	In the restatement you select several key words and repeat them back exactly. It works like an encourager, but focuses in more depth on a key issue
Paraphrase	The paraphrase feeds back to the client the essence of what has been said. The paraphrase provides a check on the accuracy of your listening and may enable the client to move on to a new topic.
Reflection of Feelings, Responding to Emotions	Underneath client concerns and problems are emotions and feelings that need to be brought out and understood. Reflection of Feeling is concerned with identifying and feeding back to the client the underlying emotional experience. Exploration of emotion is basic to understanding a client’s deeper desires and wishes. Clarifying emotion leads to better client decision making and action. Clients often come to us using the words <i>confused</i> or <i>frustrated</i> and clarifying mixed emotions is one of our important tasks.
Summarization	This skill asks you to feed back to the client the essence of longer statements or a whole interview. Many summarizations will include descriptions of behavior, thoughts, and emotion. This skill is useful in clarifying what has happened in key interview segments and in beginning and ending the interview.
Integration of Skills —Five Stages of the Interview	You will integrate the skills above into a well-formed interview using only listening skills. Many clients find themselves able to resolve their concerns and problems by themselves if you will just listen to them fully.

## BASIC ATTENDING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

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These several skills add up to what is termed the *basic listening sequence*. Observation and research have revealed that not only effective counselors use these skills. The competent physician must first listen to the patient before providing a diagnosis. The manager must listen to staff and learn important facts before making a critical decision.

The basic listening sequence taught in this book is critical in many different situations. If you listen carefully, you will often find that clients can resolve their own issues without advice or direction from you. If your clients don't come up with their own answers, you at least have an information base so that you can act more effectively.

Once you have studied and mastered each one of the basic listening skills above, this book provides advanced suggestions that can enable you to adapt the skills in a variety of situations. Special attention will be paid to the importance of drawing out client behaviors, thoughts, and feelings and, in practice sessions, applying these same skills to family therapy and to group work.

There is, of course, a second part of the microskills program called *Basic Influencing Skills*. There you will learn multiple possibilities leading to client growth and resilience. Among these are directives, confrontation, and reframing/interpretation. However, all of these skills are based on your effective listening.

As you gain experience in the interview, you will find that a positive style of interviewing and listening tends to be more effective than just focusing on client problems and difficulties. Regardless of your work setting, you will find that if you focus on the positive, you provide your clients with a solid base on which they can then work more effectively with their most challenging issues.

### **THE POSITIVE ASSET SEARCH: POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN ACTION**

***Build resilience by discovering the positive assets, strengths, and resources of each client***

Beginning counselors occasionally have the tendency to become overly fascinated with “war stories,” the basic facts about someone else’s problems and concerns. It then follows that their questions, comments, and attention are given

primarily to negative things about the client. It is fascinating to learn the intimate facts of someone else's life. But helping is not about prying into other people's affairs.

If you focus on "war stories," the client frequently jumps into your trap with glee, delighted that someone is finally listening to their problems. The naive counselor's need to pry into another person's life *and* the client's need to share how "bad" the world is may result in a spiral that defines the situation as worse than it really is.

At the other extreme, some beginning counselors are so anxious to reassure clients that real issues are never encountered. The rescuer is perhaps even more dangerous than the prying, probing counselor. Many professional and volunteer counselors are so anxious to aid clients facing difficult issues that they gloss over and hide issues so the client "doesn't feel bad." Watch out for rescuing!

People talk about what other people will listen to. If a beginning counselor only listens to weaknesses and problems, the client will only talk about weaknesses and problems. While airing of concerns is helpful and often necessary, it is only part of anyone's life picture. On the other hand, if the counselor avoids hard issues, so does the client.

*Positive psychology is about building resilience—the ability to bounce back from adversity with new renewed strength.* It has become increasingly important as a central dimension of the field. If you seek out client strengths and help them build on these, you are taking positive psychology into action.

Four more basic maxims of the helping process:

*Clients will talk about topics to which you are able and willing to listen.*

*Watch out for prying and don't be a rescuer.*

*Discover the positive assets of each client.*

*Build resilience.*

Thus we believe a significant part of any helping interview should focus on strengths of the client to cope successfully with the world. This is true of even the most experienced professional. This means listening for positive as well as negative comments. For example:

## BASIC ATTENDING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

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- Client: I really feel mixed-up and confused, nothing is going right. Society is all screwed up, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. I worked hard, but I still got laid off.
- Counselor: (accentuating the negative) The economic situation is really grim right now, you feel really hopeless. What are some of other things that bother you?
- Counselor: (accentuating the positive) Losing your job at a time like this is really hard. I hear you say you did good work. Could you share some specific things that you did on your past job which you were particularly proud of that can serve as strengths for the future?
- Counselor: (overly positive) Not to worry—it's always darkest before the dawn. (Rescuing) Let me do the worrying for a while. We'll find a way. What do you want me to do for you first?

The first response does acknowledge the feelings of desperation and hopelessness of the client and may well be a satisfactory response in a larger context. However, there are “would-be” counselors who only reinforce negative self-comments and troubles. The second response acknowledges the feelings, but also emphasizes the positive aspects of the situation, aiding the client in sorting out positive resources. The third response (reassurance) is often helpful, but can be overdone. This response fails to acknowledge the client's hurt and the counselor has taken on too much responsibility for solving the client's difficulties.

A behaviorist summarized the issue when stating that love could be defined as giving positive reinforcement to positive things about an individual. The humanist also believes in human strength and seeks to encourage self-growth from those positive assets. Different words and theories . . . but the same idea. In any session, give some attention to what's right with the individual.

Other critical maxims for you to consider are:

*Focus on the positive—search for strengths in the client and external supports in family and friends.*

*Use those strengths and supports—  
They are the building blocks for client resilience and the future.*



## **THE BASICS OF A PHILOSOPHY OF HELPING**

The program you are entering is highly skill oriented. We have noted that some beginning counselors get worried about what they “should” be doing when relating to a client. They get so worried about doing the “right” thing that in the process they become confused and less effective. A basic philosophy of helping can be helpful. Some key suggestions leading toward this philosophy follow.

### ***Honor yourself!***

The first step toward effective helping is respecting yourself and your capacities. If you don't feel good about yourself, you are very unlikely to help those who come to you. You also need to focus on your strengths and build an interviewing helping style that fits you. Unless you are comfortable with yourself, you won't be able to help others. Many beginning and experienced counselors and therapists find that they can benefit from counseling or therapy.

Each of us ultimately must define our own style of helping. When a skill or concept from this book appeals to you, go ahead and try it . . . but always be sure that it feels right to you. On the other hand, if that skill or concept doesn't appeal to you, it is still probably a good idea to try it and check it out thoroughly. But if you find it doesn't “fit,” it is best to acknowledge that fact and stay with a style that is more natural to you.

Another important maxim:

*As a counselor, you can be most helpful if you are truly yourself. Seek to define your own style of interviewing, but always with awareness that varying clients may respond to different styles than those with which you are most comfortable.*

### ***Honor the client***

Most confusion around interviewing disappears if we are willing to listen carefully and attend to the client. When you find yourself confused, lost, or wondering what to do in the interview—listen and use the attending skills of this book.

## BASIC ATTENDING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

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The major temptation in helping is to attempt to solve the problem of the client as soon as possible. The beginning counselor often barely gives the client time to get the problem out before starting to offer sympathy and solutions.

We urge you to stay away from giving early answers to those whom you would help. The use of advice, interpretation, or suggestions is for a later, more advanced, state of helping—and even then these skills should be used sparingly. *Our job is to listen.* Very few people in our society are effective listeners; it seems sad that we must teach people to listen, but it is a necessary skill that our culture does not emphasize.

Experienced professional counselors and therapists all-too-often are ineffective listeners. They may have become so fond of a special theory or method that they apply it to all clients, failing to see that what works with one person may not be effective with the next. And, we have seen many professionals who still have failed to master the basics of listening.

Other words for honoring the client are *respect* and what Carl Rogers calls *unconditional positive regard*. If you are meeting with a client who is different from you in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or physical/mental ability, can you surmount any possible bias or stereotype and work with them effectively? Perhaps more challenging for all of us in that unconditional positive regard, particularly when you are talking with a client whose values and decisions are markedly different from your own. *Evaluation* is a dangerous and destructive word in a helping relationship. Hold your breath, listen to the stories of past experiences of the client respectfully and the unconditional positive regard will develop.

Finally, honoring your client may mean that you have to be uncomfortable sometimes as you adapt your personal interviewing style to the needs of the person before you. And, if you are not sufficiently comfortable with that client (or the client is not comfortable with you), it is important to refer the client carefully to someone else.

Another maxim:

*Honoring and respecting your client may mean temporarily giving up your natural style and joining the client's world.*

***Honor Multicultural Difference***

Empathy asks you to listen carefully and join the client’s world. We often talk about seeing the world as various clients see it, hearing what they hear, and feeling what they feel. An important part of any person’s personal identity is her or his multicultural heritage. We define multicultural broadly so as to consist of at least the following dimensions:

Race/ethnicity	Socioeconomic status
Gender	Age
Sexual identity	Family history
Physical ability/disability	Language
Religious/spiritual orientation	Traumatic life experiences

Each of these groups (and others) may approach the interview in a different way and may challenge your ability to be empathic and understand them. This is so, particularly, if you “haven’t been there.” For example, anyone who has experienced the traumatic life events of cancer, rape, or war belongs to a unique cultural group. Those who are raised in an alcoholic family have their own experiences. Your ability to gain trust with people whose life experience, skin color, or sexual orientation is different from you may be challenging at times.

How can you build trust with someone who is substantially different from you? Consider the following as a beginning toward a lifetime of learning:

*Listen.* Ultimately, your ability to hear client stories and understand their world will be basic, regardless of multicultural background.

*Be willing to share yourself openly.* At times you need more than listening to build a trusting relationship. Many have found that direct and open acknowledgement of cultural difference can facilitate trust.

*Avoid stereotyping.* You will find that there is extensive variation in any multicultural group. Individual White Americans and Canadians are not the same, just as all Asian-American or Asian-Canadians differ from each other. The interview and counseling are for the individual client, not for an imagined group.

*Read, learn, participate.* Multicultural understanding can only really develop if you commit yourself to studying and participating in the life

## BASIC ATTENDING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

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of different cultural groups. This could include attending multicultural community events, a visit to a conservative or liberal church, or visiting an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

### ***How Will You Learn Basic Attending Skills?***

***Even though clearly important, listening is not easy.***

In one sense, the concepts in this book are simple. The listening skills presented here are seen by most readers as crystal clear. Clarity does not mean that practice in these skills is not necessary. Just because you can understand the basics of attending does not mean you can use them when faced with a difficult and challenging client.

A crucial question to ask yourself is whether or not you are willing to do the work to become the most effective listener possible. Practice is essential for mastery. Providing “answers” and sympathy is easy; effective listening demands more effort.

The listening skills presented here are founded on nearly forty years of counseling and interviewing practice and over 500 research studies. The skills approach is termed “microcounseling” and breaks down the complex interview into component parts and teaches them one-at-a-time. The advantage of this process is that you can readily master specific concepts and methods that will make a difference in the lives of those with whom you work.

The microcounseling training system, as you will encounter it here, consists of the following steps:

1. *Introduction/Warm-up.* You will receive a brief introduction to a basic skill of interviewing. Learning objectives will be established.
2. *Reading about the skill.* A brief summary describes the key components of the interviewing skill you are about to learn.
3. *Viewing a model of the skill in action.* Seeing a person perform a helping skill can bring reading and theory into real life. Video models provide one way to see a skill in action. Live demonstrations by experts is another way. *Seeing is believing.*

4. *Practicing.* Even more important than watching others is you taking time to practice the skills to full competence. Specific suggestions and feedback sheets are provided to facilitate your learning the skills at a full mastery level. With some more complex skills, several practice sessions may be needed.
5. *Generalizing and moving the concepts into action.* Specific suggestions for taking the concepts of the training session to your home setting are included with each skill. If you don't take learning home, it soon will be lost.

The first three steps focus on you learning the skill and should lead you to an understanding of why the skill is important and what it can do for you and your client. The last two steps, however, are the critical ones. There are many people who can develop an intellectual understanding of the helping process—but understanding is not competence in the interview.

The competent, effective interviewer practices the skills to a level of mastery and is able to take the ideas of the skill “home” to his or her daily life and work setting.

### **ETHICAL ISSUES AS YOU PRACTICE SKILLS**

Practice is central to mastery of the skills in this book, but when you practice you are working with real people. This is not a book on ethics, but we'd like to introduce some key issues.

**Competence.** You are a beginning interviewer. In these early stages do not attempt to do therapy and seek to keep your practice interviews to topics around which both you and the volunteer client are comfortable. Be ready to refer your volunteer to a more experienced counselor. Always seek supervision and consultation on these issues with your teacher or workshop leader.

**Recording and Informed Consent.** When you work with a volunteer practice client, it is very helpful if you can record the session. Volunteers need to know that this is a *practice interview*. Obtain permission before you record a session or write a transcript of what has been recorded. If you are relaxed about this request, they will be as well. Clients should be informed that you will turn off recording equipment at any point if they are uncomfortable. You may even wish to develop

## BASIC ATTENDING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

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a written consent form, as this practice is becoming more common in counseling and therapy in general.

**Confidentiality.** As this is practice, you obviously do not have legal confidentiality. But, even so, it is vital that you keep the information learned in the interview to yourself and only share it with classmates or teachers if you have the consent of the volunteer. If the volunteer should indicate that he or she may do harm to self or others or otherwise engage in illegal acts, it is your duty to break confidentiality and seek consultation with your supervisor.

For further study of ethical issues, we recommend *Issues & Ethics in the Helping Professions* by G. Corey, M. Corey, & P. Callanan (San Francisco: Cengage 2014) or a succinct summary will be found in A. Ivey, M. Ivey, & C. Zalaquett *Intentional Interviewing and Counseling*, (San Francisco: Cengage 2018).

### **MICROCOUNSELING: A BRIEF SUMMARY OF KEY THEORETICAL CONCEPTS**

We are often asked if microcounseling is a theory and mode of helping in itself or if it is merely a set of practical skills. We believe that the concepts presented here are both theoretically significant and practical. Microcounseling was first developed as a set of skills, which could be used in conjunction with other theories. This belief is still primary—regardless of the theory you select, you will find that the listening skills here are invaluable in being an effective counselor or therapist.

However, microcounseling can be viewed as a theory and method of helping in itself. Defining theory can be said to rest on three key questions:

1. Does the system organize knowledge about helping in a fashion so that it can be used in many different settings and situations?

The microskills presented here are used in many settings ranging from counseling and therapy to medical training to business management education. All these fields need effective listening. The concepts have been translated into at least twenty languages and have been used effectively in Japan, Germany, and North America with a range wide of populations. The microskills system has proven effective in workshops with multicultural groups of many types in the United States and Canada, through managers in Sweden, teachers and nurses in

Japan, Inuit and Dene social workers in the Central Arctic, and AIDS and refugee counseling in Africa.

2. Does the system contain a basic set of assumptions that can analyze, predict, or explain what happens in the helping process?

You will find, if you use certain helping skills in the interview, that you can predict what clients may be expected to say in return. You will also find that following the recommended five-stage interviewing sequence will often result in clients generating new perceptions of themselves and others.

3. Does the system explain what happens in the practice of interviewing, counseling, and therapy?

Microcounseling theoretical goals have traditionally been modest. Nonetheless, the framework explains some of the basics of effective helping. Whether you practice listening as a counselor, social worker, pastoral counselor, financial adviser, or as a child advocate in court, the listening skills presented here remain central.

Put most concisely, clients often come to us with tight and narrow ways of thinking about their problems. If we listen to them effectively, they will likely loosen the old and ineffective ways of thinking—they will generate new ways of perceiving themselves, their situations, and others.

The acts of attending and listening are very powerful. Through your careful listening, the client will come to find new perspectives and ways of being in the world. The generation of new perspectives and ways of thinking is at the heart of *Basic Attending Skills*. This is a simple, but profound, part of any comprehensive theory of helping.

*Listening lights up the brain.  
But attending behavior needs  
to be varied to meet  
individual and cultural styles.*