



# Building trust and empathy around COVID-19:

A Client-Centred Communication Approach

Training for Facility-based Providers  
Participant's Handout



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## Training objectives:

1. Understand elements of quality interpersonal communication and counselling
2. Identify techniques for practicing empathy and compassion to enhance interactions with clients
3. Understand how best to effectively communicate about COVID-19 vaccination and address vaccine hesitancy
4. Understand and find ways to address provider stress and fatigue



## Module One

# INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION (IPC)

There are three main types of communication interactions that occur within a provider-client relationship. They are:

- **Caring:** The goal is to establish and maintain a positive rapport with the client.
- **Problem solving:** The goal is for the client and provider to share all necessary information for accurate diagnoses and appropriate treatment.
- **Counselling:** The goal is for clients to understand their condition and adhere to their treatment or therapeutic regimen.

While they occur throughout an interaction, these types of communication often happen sequentially, with caring communication to establish a positive tone, then problem solving to diagnose, and finally counselling to provide relevant health education.

To communicate effectively through these different interactions, use the following interpersonal communication (IPC) techniques:

- **Effective questioning** to determine what service the client wants or how he/she is feeling, what the client already may know, or what problem he/she may have.
- **Open-ended questions** encourage the client to freely offer information, concerns, and feelings. Example: "How do you feel today?"
- **Closed-ended questions** help obtain specific information, especially if there is a limited time, such as in an emergency or in taking a medical history. Example: "Do you have any allergies?"
- **Probing questions** encourage the respondent to give further information, and to clarify an earlier point. Example: "Could you tell me more about that?"
- **Active listening** means providing verbal and nonverbal feedback to show that you are listening and paying attention to what is being said.



- **Reflection/echoing** occurs when a provider observes a client's emotions and reflects them back to him/her. Example: "It looks like you are feeling distressed," or "You appear to feel happy with the choice you have made."
- **Summarizing and paraphrasing** means repeating back to the client what you heard him/ her say in a short form. Example, "I hear you saying that you are worried about your daughter's health because she is eating poorly."
- **Praise and encouragement** build a client's sense of confidence and reinforce positive behaviours. Example: "You are doing a great thing by getting tested."
- **Giving information** clearly and simply with visual aids helps equip clients with accurate, relevant health information.





## Module Two

# COUNSELLING

In counselling, the client makes a voluntary, informed choice or decision, after complete information is given. Effective counselling must be a two-way communication, not simply telling, instructing, or informing.

IPC is used when counselling takes place but not all IPC is counselling. Skills and attitudes needed for IPC are also applicable to counselling and barriers to IPC also affect counselling.

**GATHER** is a useful tool for counselling.



# G

**GREET** your clients politely and with a smile.

# A

**ASK** your clients about reasons for coming and obtain informed consent where applicable.

# T

**TELL** your clients about their choices and proper use of medications.

# H

**HELP** your clients to understand the instructions and choose treatment options that suit them.

# E

**EXPLAIN** fully how to carry out the behavior or treatment.

# R

**RETURN** for follow-up, **REFER** your clients to other suitable health facilities and **REASSURE** them you will support them in their healthy journey.



## Module Three

# EMPATHY IN PRACTICE

Empathy is the ability to see things through another person's perspective by stepping into their shoes and trying to understand and feel what they are experiencing. Empathy helps build trust as clients feel the provider is:

- *Being transparent, honest, and open through actions, not just by saying so*
- *Listening to and understanding them and their concerns*
- *Being sincere about wanting what is best for them*

### **Tips for Practicing Empathy**

Healthcare workers practice empathy by providing compassion and care to each client they interact with. The following tips can help as health care workers connect with clients.

- Being transparent, honest and open through actions, not just by saying so
- Maintain a friendly, relaxed, and attentive attitude
- Show respect for clients
- Ensure privacy and confidentiality
- Create safe space by asking questions, listening with empathy and without judgment, to understand the client's needs.
- Accept and treat all clients equally, no matter their age, socioeconomic or marital status, parity, physical abilities, ethnicity, tribe, class, or identity
- Ask simple questions such as: "How are you feeling?"
- Look for feelings of hopelessness, depression, or lack of interest in activities

I understand  
your concerns ...

You have the right  
to be (sad, angry ...) ....

I hear what you  
are saying ...

Maybe we can discuss  
possible solutions ...

I understand that  
you are worried ...

In this situation, your  
reaction is normal ...





## How well do you listen?

Four stages to empathic listening skills:

1. Mimicking content involves listening to another person's words and repeating them back.
2. Rephrasing content shows you have thought about the words and done some logical interpretation of them.
3. Reflecting feeling shows you are listening to how the person feels about the words.
4. Rephrasing the content and reflecting the feeling shows you are listening to the content (the words) and the feeling.





## Module Four

# COVID-19 PREVENTION INCLUDING VACCINATION

### COVID-19 vaccine facts

- **Is the COVID-19 vaccine safe?**

Yes! Thorough safety standards and trials were met in the development of the vaccine. As of January 2022, **more than 9.2 billion vaccine doses have been administered around the world.** For over a year, health issues in post-vaccination patients have been continually monitored to identify any long-term concerns. So far, **no vaccines have demonstrated any serious safety concerns.** Furthermore, there is **no increased risk of death amongst COVID-19 vaccine recipients.** In fact, people who receive a COVID-19 vaccine have lower death rates from all causes than unvaccinated persons.

- **Do I still need to get the vaccine if I have had COVID-19?**

Yes! Vaccines prevent the possibility of re-infection and severity. After getting COVID-19 infection, people do get an immune response, but this varies from person to person, and it depends on whether you had a mild infection or whether you had a more severe infection. This is why it is recommended that even if you have had COVID-19 infection, you should take the vaccination because the vaccine then serves as a boost to the immune system.

- **Should immunocompromised, pregnant and breastfeeding women get the vaccine?**

Yes! Immunocompromised, pregnant and breastfeeding women can get the vaccine. Based on all the evidence that we have, it is not only safe for breastfeeding mothers to be vaccinated, but it is also highly recommended. The vaccine can protect her from getting COVID 19 or at worse have a milder form. There is no evidence of difference in vaccine effectiveness between breastfeeding and non breastfeeding mothers. Furthermore, no evidence suggests vaccines allow virus transmission to the child. However, a pregnant woman and people who are immunocompromised are more susceptible to severe disease if they are not vaccinated.

## What is vaccine hesitancy?

Vaccine hesitancy refers to a delay in the acceptance or refusal of vaccines despite its availability. Attitudes toward vaccines fall on a continuum.

Vaccines are one of the most effective medical interventions available and save millions of lives each year. Despite this, vaccine-preventable diseases are re-emerging, and vaccine acceptance remains suboptimal for routine immunizations as well as other immunizations. Vaccines save lives, but people first need to obtain the vaccinations.



*In Nigeria, 54% are “concerned about side effects”, followed by “plan to wait to see if it’s safe.”*

## Address safety & side effects concerns

If the person says...	Then explain...
“I worry about short-term side effects after getting the vaccine.”	The COVID-19 vaccines <b>stimulate your immune system</b> to protect you from the virus. Many people don’t experience any side effects; however, some common vaccine side effects include fever, headache, fatigue, soreness, or a lump under the skin where the shot was given. These <b>all are usually mild and temporary</b> .



## Addressing COVID-19 vaccine efficacy doubts

If the person says...	Then explain...
"I don't know enough about COVID-19 vaccines to make an informed decision."	All COVID-19 vaccines work with the body's natural defences to safely develop an immunity to the disease. That means that if you get exposed to the virus after being vaccinated, <b>your body is ready to fight the virus</b> and helps prevent you from getting severe illness or dying. Also, by being immunized, <b>you reduce the likelihood of transmitting COVID-19 to others.</b>

How to communicate with clients who are vaccine hesitant

- **Listen.** Understand underlying concerns and questions.
- **Convey empathy** to build trust.
- **Focus on the disease.** Pivot the conversation to the disease itself.
- **Do not correct misperceptions.** This can backfire and instead reinforce the myth — called a "boomerang effect".
- **Use effective communication strategies** like motivational interviewing, presumptive communication, and pivoting.
- **Do not be judgemental.** Don't shame people who are hesitant.

Using all of these skills together - listening, conveying empathy, focusing on the disease, not correcting misperceptions and practicing effective communication strategies is an effective counseling approach to communicating with vaccine hesitant clients.

## What if I do not know the answer to their questions?

DOs	DON'Ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accept and acknowledge uncertainty.</li><li>• Refer them to credible, scientific sources.</li><li>• Show them how to recognize and identify misinformation and rumors.</li><li>• Convey uncertainty about vaccine safety in a way that will ensure informed decision making.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Try to guess or make up an answer.</li><li>• Be overconfident, over-reassuring or try minimizing risk — this can reduce trust</li></ul>



## Module Five

# COMMUNICATING ABOUT COVID-19 VACCINATION

The following approaches help providers to communicate about COVID-19 vaccinations:

- **Presumptive communication:** The provider initiates the topic of vaccination presuming the patient will be vaccinated at the visit.

“*You need to get tested if you have symptoms of COVID-19” or “You need to get vaccinated for COVID-19 today to protect you, your family, friends, and the community around you. Do you have any questions?”*”

- **Motivational interviewing:** Strengthens a person’s own motivation and commitment to change by exploring and resolving ambivalence. It uses IPC techniques such as active listening, reflections, open-ended questions, asking permission to provide additional information, and acknowledging autonomy.

“*What questions do you have about the COVID-19 vaccine?” “I know you want to stay healthy and getting vaccinated for COVID-19 will help you do that.” “As we’ve discussed, getting vaccinated today is really important for you.” “Thanks for explaining. I understand you have some fears about getting vaccinated which I understand. It is still the best thing you can do for your health today.”*”



- **Pivoting:** Instead of providing correct information when presented with vaccine-related misinformation, focus on the disease itself. To effectively stimulate action, health care providers must be able to communicate in a way that an individual perceives themselves at risk for disease (risk perception), believes there is an effective action (response efficacy), and has confidence (self-efficacy) that they are capable of taking that action.

If a patient says something like: “I don’t think I will get the COVID-19 vaccine. I heard COVID-19 is not real, and I will be fine without it.”

**It is important to counter this with the facts about the disease and how it can impact the patient and their situation.** For example, if someone is living with HIV, then you might want to respond with: “As a PLHIV, you’re at risk for developing complications from COVID-19. Fortunately, along with other precautions such as distancing and wearing a mask, we have effective vaccines to protect you. As a healthcare worker, I can assure you they are completely safe.

### **How to respond to misinformation & myths**

1. Emphasize facts. Don’t repeat the myth as this can just reinforce it. Start with core facts and keep it simple.
2. Provide warnings. If you have to refer to the myth, explain that it is false.
3. Use nudges/defaults. Apply presumptive communication.
4. Focus on the disease. Pivot the conversation to the disease itself and provide correct explanations.



## Module Six


# ADDRESSING HEALTH CARE WORKER'S WELLBEING

Fostering a supportive work environment is important.

- First know that it is normal to feel sad, stressed, or overwhelmed during a crisis: Acknowledge your feelings and know that it is likely a shared feeling and experience for you and many of your colleagues. It does not mean you cannot do your job or that you are weak.
- Talk to people you trust or a counselor.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle: proper diet, sleep, exercise and social contacts with friends and family.
- Don't use alcohol, smoking or other drugs to deal with your emotions.
- Engage in activities that you enjoy or find meaningful regularly
- Be realistic about what you can and cannot control
- Try different activities to relax and identify what works best for you.
- If you have concerns, talk with your supervisor, and if you start feeling unwell tell your doctor immediately.

### **Ways to support other HCWs**

- Build trust and friendliness
- Have confidential discussions with your peers
- Listen without judging, making assumptions or giving advice
- Avoid conflicts in the workplace as much as possible
- Watch out for signs of fatigue and be as supportive as possible



Be kinder to  
yourself. And then  
your kindness  
can flow out into  
the world.

It's OK to not be  
OK. And it's OK to  
ask for help.

It is not the load  
that breaks you  
down. It's the way  
you carry it.

Calmness is your  
weapon against  
challenges.

Helping others  
is a way to  
help yourself.

Breathe deep to  
release negative  
energy.

Make time to  
rest and be  
thankful.



## NOTES

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal blue lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a guide for writing. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



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