



Foundational Communication Skills: The OARS Model

Effective communication strategies and interpersonal skills are required to establish, maintain, re-establish, and terminate the nurse-client relationship.¹ This resource provides an introduction to the OARS model – Open-ended questioning, Affirmation, Reflective listening, and Summarizing – a set of person-centred interaction techniques that public health nurses can use to establish and maintain rapport with clients, assess client needs, and ensure client-centred intervention and support.

These strategies can be used broadly to enhance therapeutic communication with clients; however, as the model is an established motivational interviewing tool,² OARS may be most applicable when exploring clients' motivation for change and establishing direction to achieve their goals. Examples include, but are not limited to, changes in behaviour with respect to:

- smoking/vaping/substance use
- nutrition, including decision-making around infant feeding
- seeking/using community supports
- decision-making (e.g., for contraception, vaccination)



Trauma- and Violence-Informed Care Principle:

The OARS model of communication contributes to emotionally safe nurse-client interactions; fosters opportunities for choice, collaboration, and connection between the nurse and client; and contributes to a strengths-based approach to supporting clients.

The OARS Model

O

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONING

- Open-ended questions invite the client to reflect and elaborate rather than provide specific information.
- Open-ended questions can help you understand the client's frame of reference and strengthen the collaborative relationship.
- Through open-ended questioning you can learn about your client's experiences, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and hopes for the future.

You may ask:

- *How have things changed for your family since [your pregnancy; the birth of your baby; other significant life event]?*
- *Can you help me understand ...?*
- *How do you see your life in one year, five years, etc. ...?*
- *What are some choices/possibilities?*
- *What do you want to do next?*
- *How will you measure your success?*
- *What was your experience with ...?*
- *What concerns do you have about ...?*

A

AFFIRMATION

- Affirmation is the use of statements and gestures that recognize the client's strengths, abilities, good intentions, and efforts – no matter how big or small.
- Affirmation demonstrates respect and honours the client as a person of worth, with the capability for growth and change as well as choice about whether (or not) to make these changes.
- Affirmations are best when they speak to a specific observed strength rather than something general.
- The use of affirmation in the therapeutic nurse-client relationship can facilitate engagement, establish trust, and convey empathy.

You may say:

- *You have been trying to keep your regular routine during a really difficult time. That takes a lot of strength.*
- *You handled yourself very well in that situation. I like how you [specific observation].*
- *You have been thoughtful about your decision and considered all of your options.*
- *You are really good at [specific observation].*
- *It's great that you are motivated to [specific action].*
- *You were really brave when you [specific action].*
- *You got through a really stressful time by [specific actions or behaviours].*
- *You are so confident and strong. It really shows when you [specific observation].*
- *When your child [action], you responded by [action]. What a great demonstration of how patient you are.*

R

REFLECTIVE LISTENING

- Reflective listening focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of your client’s own narrative.
- Reflective listening requires undivided attention – which is communicated nonverbally through eye contact and limiting behaviours that signal inattention, e.g., excessive note taking, shuffling papers, checking your phone, etc.
- Reflective listening requires you to first think reflectively about what your client said, and the meaning of what was said, and then to respond with a statement checking this meaning rather than assuming you already understand.
- A well-formed statement (as opposed to a question) is less likely to evoke a defensive response and more likely to facilitate engagement in the conversation.

You can reflect:

WORDS

You say that now is not a good time to be pregnant again ...

You say you are ready for a change ...

EMOTIONS

You’re really irritated when [X] happens ...

You’re worried about what will happen next ...

BEHAVIOURS

Your voice sounds shaky ...

I can see how much that affected you ...

I can hear the passion in your voice when you talk about [X].

S

SUMMARIZING

- Summaries are a brief, concise collection of reflections related to what the client has discussed during the interaction.
- Summaries can be helpful for clients to periodically hear an accumulation of their own motivations for change.
- Summarizing allows you to check that you are understanding your client’s situation, goals, or preferences.
- Summarizing statements often end with an invitation, for example, “did I miss anything?” This allows for feedback from the client and keeps the conversation client-centred.

You might summarize to:

Collect a series of interrelated items (especially if they relate to motivation to change) as they accumulate in the conversation and highlight themes

- *So you’ve mentioned that you would like to learn more about ...*
- *You have noticed ...*
- *You want to ...*

Link something the client has said to something you remember from a previous statement or conversation

- *Last time we spoke you said you wanted to ...*
- *Would you like to talk more about how you might try ...?*
- *Would it be okay if I asked you a few more questions about ...?*

Transition to another task or topic or to wrap up an interaction

- *Here is what we have discussed so far.*
- *Tell me if I’ve missed anything.*
- *How can I help with that plan?*

¹College of Nurses of Ontario. (2019). Therapeutic nurse-client relationship, Revised 2006. www.cno.org/globalassets/docs/prac/41033_therapeutic.pdf

²Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2012). Motivational interviewing: Helping people change. Guilford press

Citation: Orr, E., Proulx, J., Crosswell, L., & Jack, S.M. on behalf of the PHN-PREP Project Team (2021). *Foundational communication skills: The OARS model*. [<https://phnprep.ca/resources/oars-model>]. School of Nursing, McMaster University.

In creating the content for this Professional Resource, McMaster University led by Susan Jack engaged in research, analysis and synthesis of existing resources, guidelines, tacit professional knowledge as well as any available research evidence to date. McMaster University makes every reasonable effort to ensure that the information is accurate at the time of posting. We cannot guarantee the reliability of any information posted. This Professional Resource is for information and education purposes only and should not substitute any local policies and legislative and professional responsibilities required by your licensing body. In the event of any conflict, please follow your local policies and legislative and professional responsibilities. This material has been prepared with the support of the Province of Ontario but the views expressed in the document are those of McMaster University, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province.