

Reflective listening is not as easy as it sounds. It is not simply a matter of being quiet while the client is speaking. **Reflective listening requires you to make a mental hypothesis about the underlying meaning or feeling of client statements and then reflect that back to the client with your best**

guess about his or her meaning or feeling (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Gordon (1970) called this “active listening” and identified 12 kinds of responses that people often give to others that are not active listening and can actually derail a conversation. Exhibit 3.5 describes these roadblocks to listening.

EXHIBIT 3.5. Gordon’s 12 Roadblocks to Active Listening

<p>1. Ordering, directing, or commanding</p>	<p>Direction is given with a voice of authority. The speaker may be in a position of power (e.g., parent, employer, counselor) or the words may simply be phrased and spoken in a way that communicates that the speaker is the expert.</p>
<p>2. Warning, cautioning, or threatening</p>	<p>These statements carry an overt or covert threat of negative consequences. For example, “If you don’t stop drinking, you are going to die.”</p>
<p>3. Giving advice, making suggestions, or providing solutions prematurely or when unsolicited</p>	<p>The message recommends a course of action based on your knowledge and personal experience. These recommendations often begin with phrases like “What I would do is.”</p>
<p>4. Persuading with logic, arguing, or lecturing</p>	<p>The underlying assumption of these messages is that the client has not reasoned through the problem adequately and needs help to do so. Trying to persuade the client that your position is correct will most likely evoke a reaction and the client taking the opposite position.</p>
<p>5. Moralizing, preaching, or telling people what they should do</p>	<p>These statements contain such words as “should” or “ought,” which imply or directly convey negative judgment.</p>
<p>6. Judging, criticizing, disagreeing, or blaming</p>	<p>These messages imply that something is wrong with the client or with what the client has said. Even simple disagreement may be interpreted as critical.</p>

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7. Agreeing, approving, or praising	Praise or approval can be an obstacle if the message sanctions or implies agreement with whatever the client has said or if the praise is given too often or in general terms, like “great job.” This can lessen the impact on the person or simply disrupt the flow of the conversation.
8. Shaming, ridiculing, or labeling	These statements express disapproval and intent to correct a specific behavior or attitude. They can damage self-esteem and cause major disruptions in the counseling alliance.
9. Interpreting or analyzing	You may be tempted to impose your own interpretations on a client’s statement and to find some hidden, analytical meaning. Interpretive statements might imply you know what the client’s “real” problem is and puts you in a one-up position.
10. Reassuring, sympathizing, or consoling	Counselors often want to console the client. It is human nature to want to reassure someone who is in pain; however, sympathy is not the same as empathy. Such reassurance can interrupt the flow of communication and interfere with careful listening.
11. Questioning or probing	Do not mistake questioning for good listening. Although you may ask questions to learn more about the client, the underlying message is that you might find the right answer to all the client’s problems if enough questions are asked. In fact, intensive questioning can disrupt communication, and sometimes the client feels as if he or she is being interrogated.
12. Withdrawing, distracting, humoring, or changing the subject	Although shifting the focus or using humor may be helpful at times, it can also be a distraction and disrupt the communication.

Source: Gordon, 1970.

If you engage in any of these 12 activities, you are talking and not listening. However well intentioned, these roadblocks to listening shift the focus of the conversation from the client to the counselor. They are not consistent with the principles of person-centered counseling.

Types of reflective listening

In MI, there are several kinds of reflective listening responses that range from simple (i.e., repeating or rephrasing a client statement) to complex (i.e., using different words to reflect the underlying meaning or feeling of a client

statement). **Simple reflections engage clients and let them know that you’re genuinely interested in understanding their perspective. Complex reflections invite clients to deepen their self-exploration** (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). In MI, there are special complex reflections that you can use in specific counseling situations, like using a double-sided reflection when clients are expressing ambivalence about changing a substance use behavior. Exhibit 3.6 provides examples of simple and complex reflective listening responses to client statements about substance use.

EXHIBIT 3.6. Types of Reflective Listening Responses

TYPE	CLIENT STATEMENT	COUNSELOR RESPONSE	PURPOSE	SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS
Simple				
Repeat	"My wife is nagging me about my drinking."	"Your wife is nagging you about your drinking."	Builds rapport. Expresses empathy.	Avoid mimicking.
Rephrase	"My wife is nagging me about my drinking."	"Your wife is pressuring you about your drinking."	Expresses empathy. Highlights selected meaning or feeling.	Move the conversation along, but more slowly than complex reflections.
Complex				
Feeling	"I'd like to quit smoking marijuana so that the second-hand pot smoke won't worsen my daughter's asthma."	"You're afraid that your daughter's asthma will get worse if you continue smoking marijuana."	Highlights selected feeling. Highlights discrepancy between values and current behavior.	Selectively reinforce change talk. Avoid reinforcing sustain talk.
Meaning	"I'd like to quit smoking marijuana because I read that second-hand pot smoke can make asthma worse and I don't want that to happen to my daughter."	"You want to protect your daughter from the possibility that her asthma will get worse if you continue smoking marijuana."	Highlights selected meaning. Highlights discrepancy between values and current behavior.	Selectively reinforce change talk. Avoid reinforcing sustain talk.
Double-sided	"I know I should give up drinking, but I can't imagine life without it."	"Giving up drinking would be hard, and you recognize that it's time to stop."	Resolves ambivalence. Acknowledges sustain talk and emphasizes change talk.	Use "and" to join two reflections. Start with sustain talk reflection and end with change talk reflection.
Amplified	"I think my cocaine use is just not a problem for me."	"There are absolutely no negative consequences of using cocaine."	Intensifies sustain talk to evoke change talk.	Use sparingly. Avoid getting stuck in sustain talk.

Source: Miller & Rollnick, 2013.

Forming complex reflections

Simple reflections are fairly straightforward. You simply repeat or paraphrase what the client said. Complex reflections are more challenging. A statement could have many meanings. The first step in making a complex reflection of meaning or feelings is to make a hypothesis in your mind about what the client is trying to say (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

Use these steps to form a mental hypothesis about meaning or feelings:

1. If the client says, "I drink because I am lonely," think about the possible meanings of "lonely." Perhaps the client is saying, "I lost my spouse" or "It is hard for me to make friends" or "I can't think of anything to say when I am with my family."
2. Consider the larger conversational context. Has the client noted not having much of a social life?
3. Make your best guess about the meaning of the client's statement.
4. Offer a reflective listening response—"You drink because it is hard for you to make friends."
5. Wait for the client's response. The client will tell you either verbally or nonverbally if your guess is correct. If the client continues to talk and expands on the initial statement, you are on target.
6. Be open to being wrong. If you are, use client feedback to make another hypothesis about the client's meaning.

Remember that reflective listening is about refraining from making assumptions about the underlying message of client statements, making a hypothesis about the meaning or feeling of the statement, and then checking out your hypothesis by offering a reflective statement and listening carefully to the client's response (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Reflective listening is basic to all of four MI processes. **Follow open questions with at least one reflective listening response—but preferably two or three responses—before asking another question.** A higher ratio of reflections to questions consistently predicts positive client outcomes (Romano & Peters, 2016). It takes practice to become skillful, but the effort is worth it because

careful reflective listening builds a strong therapeutic alliance and facilitates the client's self-exploration—two essential components of person-centered counseling (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). The key to expressing accurate empathy through reflective listening is your ability to shift gears from being an expert who gives advice to being an individual supporting the client's autonomy and expertise in making decisions about changing substance use behaviors (Moyers, 2014).

Summarizing

Summarizing is a form of reflective listening that distills the essence of several client statements and reflects them back to him or her. It is not simply a collection of statements. You intentionally select statements that may have particular meaning for the client and present them in a summary that paints a fuller picture of the client's experience than simply using reflections (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

There are several types of summarization in MI (Miller & Rollnick, 2013):

- **Collecting summary:** Recalls a series of related client statements, creating a narrative to reflect on.
- **Linking summary:** Reflects a client statement; links it to an earlier statement.
- **Transitional summary:** Wraps up a conversation or task; moves the client along the change process.
- **Ambivalence summary:** Gathers client statements of sustain talk and change talk during a session. This summary should acknowledge sustain talk but reinforce and highlight change talk.
- **Recapitulation summary:** Gathers all of the change talk of many conversations. It is useful during the transition from one stage to the next when making a change plan.

At the end of a summary, ask the client whether you left anything out. This opportunity lets the client correct or add more to the summary and often leads to further discussion. Summarizing encourages client self-reflection.