Activity 2.2  The OARS Model — Essential Communication Skills

Purpose
The purpose of this activity is to help staff learn and apply OARS communication skills to build rapport and personalize counseling with clients, setting the stage for practicing these skills in Activity 2.3.

Who should participate?
Appropriate for all clinic staff who provide clinic services.

Especially important for staff who provide contraceptive counseling and education.

Staff who will participate in Activity 2.3 Communicating with Brilliance — Practicing Your Skills should participate in this activity if they are not familiar with the OARS Model.

Time
45 minutes

Preparation
Review the following:
- Module 2 Preview & Preparation
- Activity 2.2 PowerPoint Presentation
- Activity 2.2 Handouts

Materials

Handouts:
Make one copy for each participant:
- OARS Model: Essential Communication Skills
- OARS Cards Job Aid (print on cardstock and laminate if possible)
- Practice Worksheet for OARS

Presentation:
Load onto laptop and/or print slides as a handout for participants:
- The OARS Model: Essential Communication Skills

Supplies:
- (if available for presentation) Laptop, projector and screen
- Large paper to stick/tape to the wall or whiteboard (optional)
- Markers (optional)
Detailed Instructions

1. Introduce the activity:

   The purpose of this activity is to learn about the OARS model and use this model as we assess our own skill level in how we offer a safe and welcoming environment and build and maintain rapport with each client.

   In addition to helping to establish rapport, these skills can help us as we move through the contraceptive counseling process, helping us elicit client preferences for contraception and conduct an interactive, client-centered counseling session.

2. Review the Key Concepts for Participants.

   (Optional: Post on large paper or white board.)

   There are two Key Concepts for our activities on communication skills:

   - Key elements of the OARS skills-based communication model will help build and maintain rapport, and help facilitate a discussion about each client’s goals, needs, and preferences.
   - Proficiency and consistency in these skills takes a willingness to listen, reflect, learn and practice.

   We’ll have several opportunities to practice these skills in this activity and the next; and every interaction you have with a client (or friend, or co-worker!) is always an opportunity to practice.

   **Trainer Tip:** If you plan to go through Modules 3, 4 and 5 with the same group, note that these communication skills will come up in each of those modules.

3. Conduct the PowerPoint Presentation (or use the slides handout).
The model we will look at offers basic counseling skills that are easy to understand — but need practice, practice, practice.

These are skills and techniques that can be used the moment an encounter begins, and throughout the entire encounter to help build and maintain rapport.

Remember — rapport-building begins the moment your encounter begins. This may be on the telephone, at reception, when a session begins, and/or the moment a provider steps into an exam or consultation room.

The goal is to listen for the client’s goals and preferences and communicate with empathy, understanding and intention. With intention you can tailor your questions and your information to meet the client’s decision-making goals.

Who is familiar with the OARS Model? How about Motivational Interviewing (MI)?

**Trainer Tip:** The OARS model was developed by Miller and Rollnick in their MI approach, which is a larger framework outside the scope of this activity.

OARS is a simple but comprehensive model of communication that provides a framework for self-assessment & reflection aimed at improving our skills.

OARS is a client-centered model of key skills that will help you create an interactive encounter focused on the client’s goals, needs, and preferences.

**How intentional are you with your communication skills?**

Invite participants to share a few responses.

As we go through each of these skills, remember that they are used throughout an encounter; they will help you to elicit patient preferences for contraception and conduct an interactive, client-centered counseling session.

Also, remember that these skills include both verbal and non-verbal qualities and behaviors.

What are open-ended questions you ask clients (or patients)?

Invite participants to share a few responses. You may want to write them large paper or a whiteboard.

**What are the reasons we want to ask open-ended questions?**

Take a few responses before moving to the next slide.
Ask for one or more volunteers to read the four bulleted reasons why we ask open-ended questions.

Open-ended questions can help you learn about your client’s world. How can you better understand what they want, need, and how you might help?

One great over-arching question you may ask a client is: Is there anything you would like to share with me about what’s important to you that would help me give you what you need today?

What are some of the positive things you say to clients?

And why are these affirmations important?

Take time for a brief discussion.

Ask a volunteer to read the two bulleted reasons why we offer affirmations to clients.

What are other ways we can offer our clients affirmations?

How hard is this to do? How much time does it take?

Affirmations don’t have to take much time at all; the hard part is just remembering! Practice helps, and you can practice with one another.

Who has heard of “active listening”? What does “active listening” mean? (you’re engaged, demonstrated with verbal and non-verbal behaviors, etc.)

Take time for a brief discussion.

Reflective listening is a bit more specific. It is actually reflecting out loud what you hear a person say, in the words they use, such as: “… you said the irregular bleeding you’re experiencing is really frustrating.”
Reflective listening also involves more than words; it’s also how they say it, or the emotion behind the words. An example: “When you talked about having irregular bleeding, your voice got really strong. This must be really frustrating for you.”

Reflective listening is also reflecting what you see the client doing. An example may be: “When you said you don’t want to get pregnant right now, there were tears in your eyes…”

Reflective listening should be grounded in our desire to truly understand what is going on with a client. It can help us to not make assumptions about a client; if a client disagrees with a reflective statement you say to them, it’s an opportunity to correct assumptions and improve understanding.

Using reflective listening to understand a client’s words, feelings, and behaviors can also save time and help you more quickly move to what is important for your client today.

This is the heart and soul of counseling: helping the client see that you truly want to understand and help the client find the right pathway to a decision.

When do you summarize what your client has been saying?

Take time for a brief discussion.

Summarizing takes place both during and toward the end of a session. It’s an opportunity to explicitly restate what’s been said so far in the conversation.

It can help you move to a new topic, for example:

“So we’ve been talking about what’s important for you right now — not getting pregnant and finishing school — and having birth control that really, really works! Shall we talk more about the methods that are really effective and easy to use?”

It’s also a key step before moving to a plan of action, such as:

“We’ve talked about several methods and it sounds like you think an IUD might be a great choice for you. Tell me what you’ve heard are the most important points of using an IUD.”
Let’s do a brief case study to practice the skills and to think about using the skills with a client.

Distribute the **OARS Model: Essential Communication Skills** hand-out and **OARS Card** job aid to each participant.

Have one of the participants read the details about Celine.

*Think for a moment how you might begin the session… what would you say and/or do?*

Invite participants to share responses.

Have one of the participants read the dialogue box.

*What skill is the provider using?*

Invite participants to share responses.

The skill is affirming — letting Celine know that you understand that she is busy and capable.

*Why is this important — what is your intent?*

Invite participants to share responses.

This helps to build trust. You’re acknowledging her busy world, affirming her planning, and showing respect for her effort.

*How else can you provide her with an affirmation statement?*
Have one of the participants read the dialogue box.

What skill is this? And what’s the intent with using this skill?

Invite participants to share responses.

The skill is reflective listening — reflecting her words and her possible feelings, i.e., “worried?”

Doing this demonstrates understanding & empathy. Also, reflecting words, feelings, and/or behaviors can give you a chance to get to the “underneath” question or concern, checking your understanding and then digging deeper.

It’s important to use reflections throughout an encounter, to:

- help keep you on track;
- help the client know what your focus is;
- help to clarify that your understanding is the same as your client’s (be sure to ask the client to confirm!)

What else might you say?

**Trainer Tip:** People might say this is summarizing — and yes, it is. Reflective listening and summarizing are similar. The key difference is that reflective listening is usually not making a transition to another topic or closing the encounter.

Have one of the participants read the dialogue box.

What skill is the provider using? And what’s the intent?

Invite participants to share responses.

This is an open-ended question. It can help you quickly learn about a client’s experience, what method did (or did not) work, and more of what they know about birth control in general.

What else do you want to know about Celine? What are other open-ended questions that will explore, build rapport, or facilitate a decision making process?
Have one of the participants read the dialogue box.

*What skill is the provider using? And what’s the intent?*

Invite participants to share responses.

Summarizing is the skill, and the intent is to make explicit your understanding about what has been discussed or decided, and then transition into talking about other topics.

Summarizing is mostly reflective listening, with the purpose of making a transition to a new topic or the client’s action plan.

The most important thing to remember is: It’s the client’s decision and the client’s plan.

*What else might you ask?*

Do a quick review of the 4 essential skills.

Take a moment to think about which skills you feel comfortable and confident with, and what skills you’d like more practice with… would anyone like to share?

Getting comfortable in using these skills with intention takes lots of practice. I encourage you all to practice with a friend or a colleague. You could even record the practice with your phone and play it back to check out your skills.

*Any other questions or comments?*

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*References & Resources and Contact Information* are included at the end of each presentation.
4. **Hand out the OARS Practice Worksheet.**
   
   If you have time, give participants a few minutes to complete it on their own. Then review as a full group.

   If you don’t have time to review as a group, you may still hand this out, possibly as a homework assignment if you have another training session planned.

5. **Wrap up the activity.** In your own words, review these key messages:

   - **The OARS skill-based communication model helps us build and maintain rapport, and personalize a client assessment of needs, goals and preferences.**
   - **Proficiency and consistency in using these skills takes a willingness to listen, learn, practice, get feedback, practice some more, and — most importantly — grow your self-awareness and intention in using these skills.**

   *Trainer Tip:* It is ideal to follow this activity with Activity 2.3: Communicating with Brilliance — Practicing Your Skills. This will give staff a chance to practice and get some feedback from a colleague.
OARS Model: Essential Communication Skills

OARS is a skills-based, client-centered model of interactive techniques. These skills include verbal and non-verbal responses and behaviors that need to be culturally sensitive and appropriate. This model integrates the five principles of providing quality counseling from the QFP recommendations. Using these skills will help establish and maintain rapport with your client, assess your client’s needs, and personalize your counseling and education responses.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

- Establish a safe environment and help to build rapport and a trusting and respectful professional relationship.
- Explore, clarify and gain an understanding of your client’s world.
- Learn about your client’s experiences, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and hopes for the future.

You may ask:

✓ What… brings you to the clinic today?
✓ When… if ever, might you want to be a parent?
✓ Where… will you get the support you need?
✓ Who… have you talked to about birth control?
✓ How… have you made decisions before about birth control?
✓ Tell me more about…?

AFFIRMING

- Build rapport, demonstrate empathy, and affirm your client’s strengths and abilities.
- Build on your client’s level of self-efficacy and share a belief that they can be responsible for their own decisions and life choices.

You may ask:

✓ It’s great that you are here today. It’s not always easy…
✓ It sounds like you’ve been really thoughtful about your decision.
✓ You’re really trying hard to…
✓ It seems like you are really good at…

OARS Model: Essential Communication Skills

R  REFLECTIVE LISTENING

- Listen to your client to help you gain a deeper understanding of their life.
- Listen, observe, and share (reflect on) your own perceptions of what your client shares.
- Reflect on the words that they use — You say you really don’t want to be pregnant right now.
- Reflect on behavior and feelings — You have tears in your eyes and you sound sad…
- Your client gains an opportunity to “hear” your experience of what was shared reflected back to them.

You can reflect words, emotions, and/or behaviors:

(Reflecting words) Some of what I heard you say…
(Reflecting emotions) You seem [to be feeling]…
   ✓ sad
   ✓ frustrated
   ✓ excited
   ✓ angry
(Reflecting behavior) I noticed…
   ✓ tears in your eyes…
   ✓ your voice sounds shaky…
   ✓ you smiled when you said that…

S  SUMMARIZING

- Help move the conversation from the beginning, through the middle, to closing.
- Check that you are understanding your client’s goals and preferences.
- Confirm that your client has an understanding of the key elements of a plan.

Summarizing can be demonstrated in three ways:

✓ A collective summary — So let’s go over what we have talked about so far.
✓ A linking summary — A minute ago you said you wanted to talk to your partner… Would you like to talk more about how you might try?
✓ A transitional summary to close — So you’ve just described your plan. We’re always here to help in any way. What other questions do you have before you leave today?
**OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS**
- What…
- When…
- Where…
- Who…
- How…
- Tell me more about…?

**AFFIRMING**
- It’s great that you are here today…
- It sounds like you’ve been really thoughtful about your decision.
- You’re really trying hard to…
- It seems like you are really good at…

OARS Model

REFLECTIVE LISTENING

- Some of what I heard you say...
- You just said that it's really important for you to...

You seem [to be feeling]...
- sad...
- frustrated...
- excited...
- angry...

I noticed...
- tears in your eyes...
- your voice sounds shaky...
- you smiled when you said that...

SUMMARIZING

- How would you summarize...?
- A minute ago you said... would you like to talk more about that?
- It seems like your plan is to...

# OARS Practice Worksheet

## Open-ended questions – *Change these closed questions into open-ended questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you use birth control regularly?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like your birth control method?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you talk to your partner about birth control?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will you use condoms every time you have sex?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it important that you don’t get pregnant?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you take a pill every day?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you need protection from STDs?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you care if anyone knows you are using birth control?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you use alcohol or drugs?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you good at keeping track of your periods each month?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Affirming – What might be one affirming response to the statements below?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Affirming Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’ve never been here before.</td>
<td>I’ve been here before, now I’m okay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sure, I use birth control sometimes...</td>
<td>I’m really glad you use birth control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know I should use condoms, but what a hassle.</td>
<td>I understand why you might be hesitant, but it’s really important to use condoms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My girlfriend told me Depo would make me depressed, so I don’t want to try that.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My boyfriend pulls out – I haven’t gotten pregnant yet!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Reflective listening – What would be a reflective statement; reflecting words? reflecting feelings?

*Remember you can also reflect a behavior; a smile, a frown, folded arms, etc.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Reflective Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’ve tried all these methods and I just hate using birth control. It’s such a hassle.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We’ve been talking about having a baby, I’m just not sure now is the right time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My husband thinks I should get on the pill.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using condoms just doesn’t work for me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve heard that getting an IUD will really hurt!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really care about my boyfriend, but I’m just not sure I want to have sex yet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m really tired of hormones in my body – I just don’t like the way I feel.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m just not good at taking a pill every day. I think I need something that works and I can just forget.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t mind using condoms but my boyfriend just won’t use them.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s ok – if it happens; it happens.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Summarizing – Remember summarizing is a long “Reflective listening.” When will you summarize?