



How to Build Rapport with Clients

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Clearly, rapport building is an essential ingredient of a quality therapeutic relationship, but how does the clinician get there?

In her book, *The Art of Connection: 8 Ways to Enrich Rapport & Kinship for Positive Impact*, Susan Young (2017) describes the following ways to shine a positive light on others:

- Maintain a sense of calm rather than acting with defensiveness.
- Solicit the other person's opinion.
- Be patient.
- Allow the client to appear smart and insightful.
- Avoid behavior that is humiliating to the other person, such as pointing out flaws.
- Put your own ego on the back burner.
- Practice concern for and awareness of the other person's feelings.
- Find ways to make the other person feel at ease.

Along with Young's (2017) suggestions, additional methods that help clinicians build rapport include:

- Use nonverbal cues that convey warmth and understanding.
- Break the ice with small talk.
- Integrate humor into the conversation as appropriate.
- Show empathy and compassion, especially when the client is distressed.
- Avoid being judgmental.
- Treat the client as a partner/collaborator in the treatment process.
- Foster the client's sense of **self-efficacy**.
- Attend to the client's nonverbal cues.
- Use reflective listening and paraphrasing.
- Engage in active listening so the client feels truly heard.
- Do not allow disruptions or distractions during sessions.
- Maintain a positive, enthusiastic, and supportive attitude.
- Use positive affirmations.
- Clarify client confidentiality and privacy rights.
- Ensure that the clinical environment is peaceful, private, and comfortable.
- Avoid technical jargon.
- Be flexible and open minded.
- Use **open-ended questions** to elicit further information.
- Use a soothing tone of voice.
- Never move too quickly, begin with ice breaking, and proceed at the client's pace.



14 Tips for Developing Trust and Empathy

Carl Rogers believed that “true empathy is always free of any evaluative or diagnostic quality. The recipient perceives this with some surprise. ‘If I am not being judged, perhaps I am not so evil or abnormal as I have thought’” (Vincent, 2018, p. 167).

Rogers understood that by identifying with another person’s situation, the therapist elicits the client’s trust, which is crucial for motivating clients to change. These ideas are consistent with the substantive literature. In fact, **empathetic listening skills** are deemed to be essential components of evidence-based counselor training (Moyers & Miller, 2013).

There are a number of ways to enhance empathy and trust within the counseling context. For example, in a qualitative study in Australia, Phillip, Beel, and Machin (2020) examined methods that counselors use to build rapport during phone conversations with clients.

Based on their findings, the researchers reported the following recommendations for building trust and rapport during **phone counseling**:

- Empathize with the client’s emotional and cognitive frame of reference by drawing from their stories and manner of expression.
- Attend to the client’s paralinguistic cues (e.g., volume, pitch, pauses, etc.).
- Use your own paralinguistic as a way of moderating the client’s emotion.
- Use reflective responses and questions to clarify the client’s emotional and cognitive state.
- Mirror the client’s language, tone, and pace as a way of calming emotional clients.

In another qualitative study, Lynch (2012) investigated the key factors that produce successful therapeutic outcomes. Twelve interviews by licensed clinical social workers were analyzed for themes.

When asked “*How do you show empathy toward your clients?*” participants reported the following:

- Using appropriate eye contact and body language
- Using **active listening techniques** and reflecting language
- Being genuine, present, and mindful during sessions
- Focusing more on listening than speaking
- Using self-disclosure as appropriate
- Validating the client’s feelings



In a third qualitative study, open-ended interviews were conducted with female clients in order to explore client perceptions of empathic listening (Myers, 2000). Participants reported the following counselor behaviors as important for experiencing an empathic bond with the therapist:

- Expressing nonjudgmental acceptance
- Listening carefully, which includes remembering details
- Providing feedback via paraphrasing, questioning, and summarizing