

Pre-Treatment Communication Sample

Communication samples help you to better understand the dyad's communication skills prior to treatment, giving you important information about both strengths and problematic communication behaviors in need of intervention. We recommend that you conduct the communication sample just prior to the first session of the protocol. This allows you to easily segue into the content of the first session, which includes sharing that a major intervention in the treatment is improved communication.

Set Up

The set up for the communication sample should be relatively brief. The **3 R's** of setting up the communication sample include:

- 1) **Rationale for the sample** – a major aspect of the treatment involves improving their communication. Thus, you want to get a window into their current strengths and difficulties in communicating with one another to provide better treatment.
- 2) **Representative sample** – you want them to communicate as closely to how they communicate at home. Your job is to be as non-intrusive as possible in listening and watching on.
- 3) **Right size of topic** – you want to have them choose a topic that is moderately distressing in their relationship (how they negotiate this choice is also important information to collect). If the topic is too “hot” or too “cold,” you are not as likely to get a good sense of their communication skills.

Here is a sample of the introduction:

“As I mentioned in our assessment session, one of the major parts of the treatment is improving your communication. Before we start, I would like to get a window into the way that you currently communicate with one another.

I'd like you to communicate with one another as closely as possible to how you communicate with one another at home. That will give me the best information about things you seem to be doing well with and other things that we can work on to improve your relationship. I will be here in the room, but I'm going to ask you to turn your chairs toward each other, and I will move my chair way back and stay as much as possible out of your way while you are communicating.

I'd like you to choose a topic that is moderately distressing for the two of you to talk about – not something that is your biggest source of arguments or something that you barely disagree about. It is ok if your conversation moves on to other topics, but we will start with this topic. Can the two of you think of something that is moderately distressing to talk about?”

It is not imperative that the dyad choose the “right” topic to discuss. The dyads will tend to discuss the important topics, no matter where they start for a topic, and their typical manner of communicating will be displayed in the sample.

Allow the dyad to communicate between 5 and 10 minutes.

What to Look for in Communication Samples

Here are a few things to look for in the communication sample:

Strengths to Highlight

- Do they naturally paraphrase or clarify?
- Is there eye contact?
- Do they share emotions? Is there a range of emotions shared?
- Is there a balance in the amount of time each person spends communicating?

Concerns to Address

- Is there hostility, contemptuousness, or disgust conveyed via vocal tone or non-verbals (e.g., eye rolling, heavy sighing)?
- Any name calling?
- Is there exaggerated language (always, never, all the time)?
- Is there mindreading?
- What does their body language convey? (openness, defensiveness, indifference, closeness)
- Do they interrupt each other?

Feedback

When you end the sample period, be sure to thank the dyad for giving you the opportunity to observe their communication and tell them how helpful it was to you in planning their treatment. Also, it is helpful to ask them how representative the conversation was to conversations they have at home (“On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being exactly like conversations at home, how similar was this conversation to conversations you have at home on these topics?”).

Then, be sure to point out at LEAST one strength that you observed to instill hope for change. In the worst of dyads, you can always say that they are at least still talking with one another. Also, indicate that you noticed that there are some ways that they communicate with one another that you believe that you can work on with them that will improve the way they communicate with one another and, thereby, improve their relationship.

You can then transition into the content of the first session of the therapy, reminding them that improving their communication is one of the key targets of the therapy.