

THE OARS MODEL¹ **ESSENTIAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

O.A.R.S. is a skills-based model of interactive techniques adapted for a peer-centered approach, using motivational interviewing principles. These skill-based techniques include verbal and non-verbal responses and behaviors. Both verbal and non-verbal techniques need to be adapted to be culturally sensitive and appropriate.

The OARS Model includes four basic skills:

- O** = Open-Ended Questions
- A** = Affirmations
- R** = Reflective Listening
- S** = Summarizing

The purpose of referring to the OARS model is to:

- 1) Provide us with a **common language** when teaching communication skills.
- 2) Provide us with a “**checklist**” of skills as we do our on-going skills self-assessment.
- 3) Provide us with a format to help us be **intentional** when working with our peers. Using skills intentionally helps us become more efficient and more effective in the work that we do.

¹ Miller, W.R., & Rollnick, S.; Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People for Change, 2nd Edition. New York: Guilford Press, 2002

O = OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

As a professional, one of the most important skills (techniques) you will use with peers is open-ended questions. Using this skill effectively can save a lot of time in each session. When you use open-ended questions effectively, your peer is usually doing most of the talking.

The purpose of using open-ended questions is to:

- **Establish a safe environment, and build trusting and respectful relationships.**
- **Explore, clarify and gain an understanding of your peer’s world.**
- **Learn about the peer’s past experience, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors.**
- **Gather information – peer does most of the talking.**
- **Help the peer make an informed decision. EXAMPLES – Ask:**

1. *What has worked in the past?*
2. *How can I help you today?*

Sometimes closed questions are appropriate:

1. *Have you had a drug test?*

Avoid "Why" questions; use "How" or "What" instead:

"Why" questions can put a person on the defensive. Listen to how these questions sound.

“Why”...

Better... “What” or “How” ...

1. Why didn’t you use condoms with a new partner? What did you do to protect yourself?
2. Why did you wait so long to come see me? What made it hard to come see me?

Using “What” or “How” in your questions can often bring you the information you need without asking the peer to justify a decision or behavior.

A = AFFIRMATIONS

The skill (technique) that is often forgotten is the simple affirmation statement to a peer about what they have already done, or a personal strength, or ability. An affirmation takes very little time, but it does require that you listen very carefully to what a peer is telling you and find opportunities to acknowledge the positive aspects of your peer’s life.

The purpose of using affirmation statements is to:

- **Build rapport; demonstrate empathy; affirm exploration into the peer’s world.**
- **Affirm the peer’s past decisions, abilities, and healthy behaviors.**
- **Build a peer’s self-efficacy – an ability to believe they can be responsible for their own decisions and their lives.**

EXAMPLES

1. Use appropriate silence, attentive body posture and appropriate eye contact.
2. Maintain relaxed facial expression and voice tone.
3. Use statements of appreciation, understanding and positive feedback.
 - I am so glad you came into the clinic today—it isn’t always easy the first time.
 - You are ready taking care of yourself, when you let someone know where you will be and when

R= REFLECTIVE LISTENING

The most challenging skill (technique) is to listen reflectively to your peer. This skill also requires that you listen very carefully, observe your peer’s body language and behavior and reflect using your own words and perceptions.

Using this skill effectively promotes the most movement in a peer’s awareness. This part of your intervention can help a peer make more intentional decisions and consider behavior changes.

The purpose of using reflective listening is to:

- **Demonstrate to the peer that you are listening and trying to understand their situation.**
- **Offer the peer an opportunity to “hear” their own words, feelings and behaviors reflected back to them.**
- **Reflect the peer’s thoughts, feelings and behaviors.**
- **Reflect the peer’s general experiences and the “in the moment” experience of the visit.**

The following are types of reflective listening:

1. **Simple reflection** (repeat the peer’s words)
2. **Reflecting feelings** (reflect what the peer might be feeling) **A format for reflecting feelings:**
“You’re feeling _____ because _____.”
3. **Reflecting behavior** (state observation about the peer’s behavior)
A format for reflecting behavior: *“I noticed you just _____.”* *“What are you thinking?”-or- “What are you feeling right now?”*
4. **Amplified reflection** (rephrase the peer’s words - exaggerated)
5. **Double-sided reflection** (peer’s words + note ambivalence – and point out discrepancy)
6. **Shifting focus** (going back to something else or changing the direction)
7. **Rolling with ambivalence** (accept the peer’s perception)
8. **Reframing** (invite peer to examine their perception in a new way)

S = SUMMARIZING

Summarizing, which may also include paraphrasing, is the skill that will help the professional and the peer move through a session to transitions & closure. Summarizing can be demonstrated in three (3) variations:

- 1. A collective summary**—*“So let’s go over what we have talked about so far.”*
- 2. A linking summary**—*“A minute ago you said you wanted to talk to _____. Maybe now we can talk about how you might try ….”*
- 3. A transitional summary**—*“So you will make an appointment today before you leave and maybe we will see you again soon.”*

Summarizing skills keep you and your peer on the same page throughout your session. In addition, summarizing the session will help you close your session with the peer’s plan of action.