

Jennifer Wiggins and Anna Middleton (eds): *Getting the Message Across: Communication with Diverse Populations in Clinical Genetics*

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Nancy Steinberg Warren

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Goal Edited by genetic counselors in the United Kingdom (UK), this book targets genetic counselors and other genetics professionals working in the UK and other English-speaking countries with “practical tips that support cross-cultural counseling” (preface xi). Each of the 15 chapters is authored by genetic counselors, and other genetics and/or other medical professionals with impressive credentials. The contents most definitely apply to genetic counseling practice, although there is sufficient breadth for the book to be helpful to all genetics and other professionals and staff involved in communicating with clients in health care settings. At times, the authors note practice and resource differences in other countries, but for the most part, the content is applicable to genetic counseling practice anywhere.

The preface chapter succinctly reviews the elements of effective communication, including fundamentals such as: treat each client as unique, avoid bias and stereotyping, continue to hone counseling skills, and strive to provide all clients with the best learning opportunities possible. Written communications, verbal communications in person, by phone, and use of assistive devices, as well as attending to non-verbal and emotional communication cues are addressed in multiple places throughout the book.

Structure and Content Each chapter is structured around four sections: Background, Preparing for the Consultation, Communication in the Consultation, and Summary. There is considerable variation in the extent to which individual chapter authors adhere to this structure in terms of breadth, depth and

length. Case studies are incorporated into every chapter, and most, but not all cases are genetic counseling-specific. The chapters are self-standing and there is no apparent “sequence” of topics. In general, the initial chapters are very comprehensive, providing exquisitely detailed content (Communicating with Clients who are D/deaf or Hard of Hearing; Communicating with Clients who are Visually Impaired). At times, the authors delineate step-by-step internal thoughts a counselor might use to prepare for and/or evaluate a counseling session. Immersing oneself in such internal dialogue may help break down the potentially overwhelming complexity of cross-cultural communication into tangible checklists of baby steps and skills. Gaining a better understanding of these micro-dynamics of communication can be both challenging and motivational. Each chapter includes opportunities for professional and personal growth with comprehensive references and suggestions for further reading, including country-specific resources when appropriate.

Latter chapters are generally short and do not always explicitly address genetics practice. However, all of the chapters provide valuable insights that are applicable to genetic counseling and add to our professional resource materials. Even if we are not working with diverse clients of a particular group that is addressed in the book, our understanding of people in general will be enhanced (e.g., communicating with clients who disclose sexual abuse; communicating with clients who are terminally ill; communicating with teenagers).

Utility Counselors may want to review individual chapters to prepare for clinic, based on expected client demographics. Given the limited text-based resources on cross cultural communication in genetic counseling, the book is valuable for that alone. But, what if one never counsels clients who are blind; why read this chapter? My feeling is that counselors will take

N. S. Warren (✉)
Genetic Counseling Toolkit, LLC, Cincinnati, OH, USA
e-mail: nancy@geneticcounselingtoolkit.org

maximum advantage of this book by using it as a general source of counseling tips and skills. For example, Chapters 5 and 6 (Communicating with Clients from the Irish Traveler and Pakistani Muslim Communities, respectively) provide useful information when working with consanguineous clients of any background. A transferable communication tip: “medical conditions don’t occur because of marriage choice, but because of recessive genes (i.e., a different emphasis is needed to take the blame away from the marriage)” (p. 103). Guidance for greeting and addressing clients from various communities is delineated in detail (ultra-orthodox Jewish, Pakistani Muslim), instilling caution in the universal applicability of fundamental routines. While not the primary intent of this book, counseling topics such as non-directive and directive counseling, facilitating decision making, and countertransference and transference are discussed in the context of cross cultural communication. I would encourage each reader to annotate his/her personal copy of the book, highlighting skills that can be meaningfully applied to one’s own practice.

Organizational Cultural Competence No matter how attuned an individual counselor may be to cultural differences, a conducive work environment is essential for facilitating optimal communication with clients. The book addresses how the workplace/health care setting can explicitly or implicitly signal “we welcome you” (or...“don’t bother me”) to clients. Specifically, the book provides helpful ideas on enhancing the content and format of various written communications and visual aids for clients of all backgrounds, as well as optimizing institutional signage, waiting room procedures, clinic room lighting, appointment schedules and timing, clinic locations and accessibility, and institutional resources such as interpret-

er and translation services and staff demographics and training. Reviewing these ideas empowers genetic counselors to take advantage of available institutional resources and/or formulate specific requests to their departments to enhance/modify existing procedures to create a welcoming environment for all clients.

Drawbacks The major weakness of the book is the lack of uniformity of the chapters, despite the four-section format set forth by the editors. Also, Chapter 13 on Communication via Telephone or Video Conferencing includes minimal information on video conferencing. At times, the book includes tips taken directly from other sources (with appropriate Citations).

Recommendations *Getting the Message Across: Communications with Diverse Populations in Clinical Genetics* provides a guided tour for enhancing provision of proactive client-centered genetic counseling. It is appropriate reading for students as well as seasoned counselors working in any setting. The entire book can be read through in an afternoon, but it can also serve as a valuable ongoing resource if one spends time annotating and noting key communication tips for future reference. Some communication “tips” are just good counseling techniques, reminding readers to draw upon fundamental counseling tools when communicating with clients from diverse populations. “Our book aims to add another level of awareness that can be incorporated into...[good communication skills] toolkit” (preface xiii). While continued discourse is needed on all the included topics, this book is a welcome new addition to the genetic counseling literature. I recommend this short, but pithy, book for the reference libraries of all genetic counseling training programs and genetics centers.