

Customer Service Notes for *wic*

Facial Expressions – An Important Part of Non-Verbal Communication

We know that what we say and the words we use are only one aspect of communication. The non-verbal aspect of communication is also important, and our facial expressions often tell a story. In fact, experts say that 7% of human communication comes from the words we choose, another 38% comes from the tone of voice we use, and a whopping 55% of our communications come from the body language we display.

Consider a new participant who is apprehensive as she heads to the local WIC agency. Suppose she is greeted by a clerical staff member who shows no emotion. This first impression will not comfort the new participant, and may even increase her apprehension. Compare this with a staff member who smiles and offers a positive welcome to the agency, helping to alleviate the anxiety of walking in for the first time, perhaps even making the new participant feel as though they are happy to see them.

A negative or flat facial expression can pre-empt the content of what the staff member says – so it's important to avoid displaying a negative expression with participants. For example: Suppose you are a nutritionist who is meeting with a participant, and you previously advised adding more fruits and vegetables to her child's diet. During the appointment it becomes clear that the participant has made very little progress. Even though you may be frustrated by this lack of progress, do not frown, as this may cause the participant to become defensive or even lash out. Maintain a neutral expression and recognize that you may need to continue to provide encouragement to this participant. You may need to empathize with her a bit and try to put a "positive face" on the situation, so that the participant knows you understand how difficult things can be.

One negative expression to avoid in particular is the sarcastic smile or the "smirk." Often, we may not realize that we are smirking and possibly offending the participant. The sarcastic smile implies that you know better, or that you don't believe them, or any number of other negative impressions. This also applies to our communications with co-workers, who will certainly not see us as a team player if we appear sarcastic.

Lastly, we encourage participants in all of our training sessions to smile on the phone. Smiling on the phone helps to maintain a positive attitude even when you are stressed because of a heavy workload or a challenging participant. The person on the other end of the phone will be able to tell that you are smiling, and the reverse is definitely true: it is very easy to read through the tone of voice when someone is tense, overwhelmed or in the worst case, just plain angry.

Try to make sure that your other non-verbal cues match your smile. More specifically, are you making eye contact? Avoid crossing your arms, slouching, or leaning way back. If you are smiling, then to be authentic all of your body language needs to be positive.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Are you aware of your facial expressions with participants, especially when you are frustrated?
2. Can you commit to smiling when you pick up the phone, helping to promote a more positive conversation?

