

ATTENDING BEHAVIOR

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ATTENDING BEHAVIOR

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1. Core Definition

Attending behavior refers to the specific constellation of verbal and non-verbal actions engaged in by an individual while attentively listening to another person. It constitutes the observable physical presence and demeanor that signals deep engagement, interest, and receptivity to the speaker's message. This set of behaviors is foundational in therapeutic and professional helping relationships, serving as the essential bedrock upon which successful communication and rapport are built. Without appropriate attending behavior, a listener--whether a therapist, counselor, educator, or manager--risks conveying apathy, distraction, or judgment, thereby inhibiting the speaker's willingness to self-disclose or communicate fully.

The concept emphasizes that listening is not merely a passive cognitive process of auditory reception; rather, it is an active, overt performance involving the entire body. Attending behaviors are crucial because they communicate empathy and validation before any verbal response is offered. They assure the speaker that their narrative is being received accurately and respectfully. Examples of these behaviors typically include maintaining an open and relaxed posture, establishing appropriate eye contact, utilizing receptive facial expressions, and strategically using minimal encouragers (e.g., nods or brief verbal affirmations like "I see" or "uh-huh").

In professional contexts, particularly counseling, attending behavior is often categorized as a "micro-skill," meaning it is a discrete, trainable communication technique. Mastery of these physical cues allows the practitioner to manage the immediate interpersonal climate, reducing defensive barriers and fostering an environment conducive to introspection and emotional processing. The quality of attending behavior directly impacts the therapeutic alliance, which is widely recognized as one of the most significant predictors of successful treatment outcomes across various modalities.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

While the importance of non-verbal communication has been acknowledged throughout human history, the formal study and categorization of attending behavior as a discrete therapeutic skill gained prominence in the mid-20th century. This development coincided with the rise of humanistic and client-centered approaches, pioneered primarily by Carl Rogers. Rogers emphasized the critical nature of core conditions--specifically congruence, unconditional positive regard, and accurate empathic understanding--to facilitate client growth. Attending behavior provided the tangible, observable mechanism through which a therapist could demonstrate these internal attitudes.

The structured teaching of attending behavior was formalized later, notably through the work of Allen E. Ivey and his colleagues in the 1960s and 1970s. Ivey developed the widely adopted Micro-counseling Training Model, which broke down complex counseling skills into measurable, discrete units. Attending behavior was placed as one of the foundational skills--often the very first skill taught--essential for beginning counselors. This systematic approach allowed trainees to practice and receive immediate feedback on specific non-verbal cues, transforming what was once considered innate interpersonal intuition into a pedagogically accessible competence.

Prior to its formalization in counseling pedagogy, research into proxemics (the study of personal space) and kinesics (the study of body movements) laid the scientific groundwork for understanding how physical behavior influences interpersonal dynamics. Researchers like Albert Mehrabian highlighted the overwhelming contribution of non-verbal elements (body language and tone of voice) over strictly verbal content in conveying meaning and emotional state, further cementing the necessity of mastering attending behaviors for effective communication across all professional fields.

3. Key Characteristics and Components (The SOLER Model)

The components of effective attending behavior are frequently summarized using mnemonic devices, the most recognized being the **SOLER model**, initially popularized by Gerard Egan in his skilled helper model. SOLER provides a practical, easily trainable framework for ensuring physical presence and appropriate engagement. While initially designed for counseling, its principles are broadly applicable to effective listening in any context, from clinical interviews to workplace discussions.

The components of **SOLER** are detailed as follows:

S - Face the client Squarely: This means adopting a posture that directly faces the speaker, signaling that the listener is fully available and not mentally or physically preparing for departure. Turning one's body slightly away can subconsciously imply hesitancy or partial engagement. Facing squarely facilitates open body language and direct engagement.

O - Adopt an Open Posture: The arms and legs should remain uncrossed. Crossed limbs, particularly arms folded tightly across the chest, are internationally recognized non-verbal barriers often interpreted as defensive, closed-off, or resistant. An open posture suggests receptivity and willingness to accept the speaker's message without defensiveness.

L - Lean or Look toward the client: A slight forward lean, typically no more than a few inches, conveys interest and active involvement. This slight inclination demonstrates effort in listening and reduces the perceived distance between the speaker and listener. Conversely, leaning backward can signal detachment or boredom.

E - Maintain Eye Contact: Effective eye contact is critical but must be managed appropriately. It should be natural, steady, and intermittent, rather than a fixed stare, which can be interpreted as aggressive or unsettling. The goal is to monitor the speaker's emotional state and acknowledge their participation, using eye contact to regulate the flow of communication.

R - Be Relatively Relaxed or Natural: The listener's posture should appear comfortable and free from nervous mannerisms (e.g., fidgeting, tapping). Authenticity is key; while the other SOLER elements are structured, they must be integrated naturally so the attending behavior appears genuine, rather than robotic or performed. Relaxation minimizes distraction and models calmness for the speaker.

4. Attending Behavior vs. Active Listening

It is essential to distinguish **attending behavior** from the broader concept of **active listening**, although the two are inextricably linked and often used synergistically. Attending behavior primarily focuses on the *non-verbal, physical prerequisites* of receiving communication. It addresses the "how" of physical presence--posture, gaze, and facial expression--ensuring that the physical environment supports communication flow and rapport establishment. It is the silent, immediate demonstration of presence and interest.

In contrast, **active listening** encompasses attending behavior but extends far beyond it to include *verbal and cognitive processes*. Active listening skills include sophisticated techniques such as reflection of feeling, paraphrasing, summarizing, and clarification. These verbal responses prove to the speaker that the message content, not just the act of speaking, has been correctly understood and processed. Thus, attending behavior is the foundation that enables active listening; one must first attend effectively before one can listen actively and respond accurately.

For example, a counselor might exhibit perfect attending behaviors (SOLER compliance) yet fail at active listening if they misinterpret the client's core message when summarizing. Conversely, a counselor who summarizes perfectly but exhibits poor attending behavior (e.g., avoiding eye contact, slouching) may undermine the credibility of their verbal response, causing the client to doubt the sincerity of the understanding. Therefore, both sets of skills must be integrated seamlessly, but attending behavior serves as the initial, non-negotiable step in building trust and validating the speaker's experience.

5. Significance in Therapeutic and Communication Settings

The mastery of attending behavior is frequently cited as a "cornerstone" of effective professional communication, particularly in helping professions like counseling, social work, and nursing. Its primary significance lies in its capacity to rapidly establish **rapport** and **therapeutic alliance**. When a speaker feels genuinely seen and heard through consistent, positive non-verbal cues, they

are more likely to perceive the listener as trustworthy, empathetic, and competent. This trust is crucial for facilitating deeper self-exploration and vulnerability in therapy.

Furthermore, attending behavior serves a vital diagnostic function. The listener's consistent non-verbal cues help minimize external noise and distractions, allowing the speaker to focus on articulating their internal state. Simultaneously, the listener uses their attending posture to focus their own attention entirely on the speaker. This heightened focus allows the professional to pick up on subtle non-verbal messages conveyed by the client--such as shifts in tone, micro-expressions, or changes in posture--which often carry more emotional weight than the verbal content itself.

Beyond clinical settings, attending behavior is critical in leadership, mediation, and customer service. In organizational contexts, a leader who demonstrates strong attending behaviors signals respect for their team members, encouraging open dialogue and fostering a sense of psychological safety. This can significantly improve information flow, conflict resolution, and overall team morale. The consistent application of these skills transforms a mere interaction into a meaningful interpersonal encounter, maximizing the efficacy of communication exchange.

6. Cultural and Contextual Considerations

While attending behavior is universally recognized as important, the specific manifestations and interpretations of its components are heavily influenced by cultural norms. A behavior considered highly attentive and respectful in one cultural context may be deemed inappropriate, aggressive, or rude in another. Effective professional practice requires cultural humility and the flexibility to adapt attending behaviors to the client's or speaker's background.

For instance, **eye contact** is perhaps the most contextually sensitive component of attending behavior. In many Western cultures (e.g., North America and parts of Europe), consistent but non-staring eye contact is a marker of honesty, interest, and engagement. Conversely, in many East Asian, African, and Indigenous cultures, direct, sustained eye contact, particularly between individuals of different social status or age, can be viewed as challenging, disrespectful, or overly intrusive. In these contexts, polite attending may necessitate lowering the gaze or using only peripheral vision during sensitive disclosures.

Similarly, **proxemics** (physical distance) and the acceptability of a slight forward lean vary widely. What constitutes an "open posture" might also shift; some cultures use specific hand gestures or resting positions that could be misinterpreted in different contexts. Therefore, professional training increasingly emphasizes that while the *intent* (to show interest and respect) remains constant, the *behavioral execution* must be fluid, requiring the practitioner to observe and mirror culturally appropriate listening cues without appearing inauthentic, a skill known as "cultural empathy" or culturally sensitive attending.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its status as a foundational skill, attending behavior, particularly when taught rigidly through models like SOLER, faces certain criticisms. One primary concern is the potential for **artificiality**. When trainees focus excessively on performing the checklist of behaviors (squarely facing, leaning forward), their actions can appear wooden, mechanical, or unnatural. This performance anxiety can distract the listener from the content of the message and may be perceived by the speaker as insincere or manufactured, thus damaging the very rapport the behavior is intended to build.

A related criticism pertains to **misinterpretation**. While attending behaviors aim to convey a standard message (interest, acceptance), they are filtered through the speaker's subjective experience and cultural lens. For example, a client suffering from paranoia or high anxiety might interpret the counselor's steady eye contact as threatening scrutiny rather than positive attention. Furthermore, focusing too heavily on non-verbal compliance risks overlooking the listener's genuine internal state; a therapist may be physically attending perfectly while mentally distracted or judgmental. Critics argue that genuine empathy and congruence should drive the behavior, rather than simply mastering the technical performance.

Finally, there is a debate regarding the over-simplification inherent in micro-skills training. While useful for beginners, the rigid application of attending behaviors may fail to account for complex, dynamic interactions. Expert clinicians often deviate from the SOLER model based on intuition, context, and client needs. Advanced practice integrates attending behavior so seamlessly with verbal and cognitive processing that the physical acts become naturally responsive rather than consciously performed, minimizing the risk of appearing manufactured or distracting.

Further Reading

[Active Listening \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[The SOLER Model in Counseling and Therapy \(Verywell Mind\)](#)

[Micro-skills Training in Counseling \(American Psychological Association\)](#)

[Nonverbal Communication and Kinesics \(Wikipedia\)](#)