

EIBL: A New Concept for Integrating Emotional Intelligence and Body Language Reading to Build Rapport with Clients

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Rapport with clients is essential to the therapeutic relationship, thus accurately reading body language and utilizing emotional intelligence can strengthen the relationship. Emotional intelligence (EI; emotional quotient, EQ) is the capability of individuals to recognize, appropriately identify, monitor, and manage their own and others' emotions, and to use the emotional information to guide their thinking and behavior in a given situation. Communication, verbal and nonverbal, is dynamic rather than static. At times, there may be information transferred that goes unnoticed, especially in nonverbal communication (i.e., voice tone, gestures, body positioning, speech rate and pitch, head and eye movement, and micro-expressions). Reading body language, which is a form of nonverbal communication, can help clinicians uncover underlying issues when body language reading is done accurately and coupled with emotional intelligence. The two concepts, emotional intelligence and body language, have been studied separately but not integrated as one skill, emotionally intelligent body language (EIBL), thus this article explores it as a single concept to support rapport-building with clients.

Psychologists and therapists work with clients regularly on the healthy expression of and coping with emotions. To recognize one's own emotions such as in countertransference and recognize others' emotions, identify or label emotions appropriately (i.e., not mistaking sadness for anger), monitor emotions (e.g., the onset, intensity, duration, and direction of emotions), and manage them by using the emotions from all parties to guide the thinking and behavior for an effective and productive outcome is enhanced when reading one's own and a client's body language in that both emotional intelligence and accurate body language reading require attentiveness and empathy. Mental health practitioners are uniquely positioned to utilize emotionally intelligent body language and to read body language because their behaviors are conducive to the training received to empower clients in their emotion-regulation of life events.

Mental health professionals already subscribe to the ethical principal of do no harm [1], thus are familiar with the intricate dynamics of a therapy session and overall relationship with clients. Mirroring or matching body language, probing to determine underlying emotions of a facial micro-expression, or attending to the bodily shifts and gestures, as well as making comfort with the silence may strengthen rapport with clients, given genuineness and timing, as it communicates that the clinician is present, concerned, and in-tune with the client.

The clinician's body language is emotionally intelligent when it allows the client to self-express freely, and the clinician is aware of the emotions arisen as well as uses them to extend beyond the surface with a client.

Tenets of Emotionally Intelligent Body Language (EIBL)

Combining emotional intelligence and body language reading is integral not only in personal and professional development but also in building rapport with clients. As an integrated skill, EIBL forms three tenets [2]:

1. Emotions expressed in nonverbal communication optimize people skills. Being aware of and monitoring one's own emotional compass fosters both personal growth and interpersonal relationships. Mental health professionals allowing themselves to feel emotions and to be receptive to the emotions complements reading body language to identify clients' emotions. Normalizing the underlying emotions (utilizing EI) expressed in nonverbal communication (reading body language) is one way to build rapport as it combines emotional intelligence and body language reading. The objective is not necessarily to agree with others' emotions but to acknowledge and respect them.
2. Nonverbal communication makes more impact than verbal communication. Giving attention to the words and to the unspoken or nonverbal communication is important because it is possible for the verbal and nonverbal to be incongruent. In communication, up to 93% is nonverbal, indicating that the majority of communication that the recipient attends to is nonverbal (55% body language, 38% tone of voice, and 7% words; [3,4]). The nonverbal can give information to the mental health practitioner that the spoken, or verbal, language does not. A client's micro-expression of contempt or happiness, for example, will provide necessary information about his/her feeling for something or someone, and if missed, can impede the relationship with the clinician.
3. Emotional intelligence and body language reading skills increase the influence and impact in business, social, and personal relationships. The body language that people see determines how they view and interact with others. For example, consistently showing self-awareness and empathy may impact situation-management and increase the influence in a relationship [5]. Utilizing emotional intelligence and confident body language increases the influence in a relationship to build rapport, earn trust, and create a safe space. Integrating the skills of reading and interpreting emotions and body language could be the difference in gaining and maintaining clients.

Certainly, body language alone does not determine whether someone decides to engage with others as there are additional personal and cultural factors to consider. However, accurately reading the nonverbal communication and associated emotions greatly contributes to navigating human relationships.

Reading the Nonverbal

When reading nonverbal cues, it is useful to apply fundamental facets to obtain a clear reading and interpretation of body language:

- 1) The first is to conduct a baseline of clients' behaviors in natural settings or conditions, with the naked eye. Rather than quickly forming conclusions based upon perception or a single occurrence, baselining involves observing clients in their calm state without pressure or nerves to be able to compare if/when changes occur due to transitions in a conversation or in the therapeutic relationship. Perhaps, surface level questions that are nonthreatening or do not evoke emotional intensity may maintain a calm state. The verbal and nonverbal communication from head to feet are essential to notice.
- 2) The second step is to yield to warning signs. There is not only one or a specific emotional or bodily sign that determines whether someone is being deceptive, honest, hesitant, open, and so forth, hence conducting a preliminary baseline. Although there are several myths and misconceptions about eye contact or eye direction, mental health practitioners cannot rely on these. In this second step, it may help to ask deeper level and open-ended questions. The more opportunity there is to speak, then the more clinicians can identify, monitor, and manage emotions that arise as well as observe any changes from the baseline in the nonverbal communication. This is yielding to warning signs for when the body reveals information about clients' emotions that they may not have verbalized. Thus, connecting with those emotions underneath and noticing changes and shifts in the body can build rapport with clients. Observation of shifts from the baseline help when a topic arises again in a session and there is a behavioral change on that particular topic, warranting further probing to uncover underlying emotions. Perhaps, revisiting that topic later in the same conversation or at a different time to see any behavioral changes will show signs of change. This is where emotional intelligence is useful to identify clients' emotions to allow their expression of or expounding on the emotion(s).
- 3) The third step is to cluster the warning signs; if three or more body language behaviors in a client changes from the baseline, then it is a cluster. For example, if a particular topic during a session shows a client displaying different behaviors than their natural, calm baseline state in three or more ways, such as in facial expressions,

voice modulations and volume, posture, and body positioning, then it forms a cluster on that given topic, indicating an un-verbalized emotion that the clinician should further explore.

Learning to read emotions and body language is not to criticize or manipulate clients' emotional expression or nonverbal communication, but rather to use the emotional information to build rapport with clients. Emotional intelligence and body language are integral to the therapeutic process. Thus, combining two important skills as one, emotionally intelligent body language (EIBL), and integrating it within practice with clients is to build trustworthy relationships with effective communication. Learning such a skill for mental health professionals helps to recognize, identify, monitor, and manage their own emotions and those of others for a productive and useful outcome.

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