

AFFIRMATIONS *as distinct from* PRAISE/COMPLIMENTS

1. **Purposes of Affirmation:** (A form of reflective listening, but more affirming)

1. Increase Hope, and
2. Anchor person in his/her INTERNAL Strengths/Avail. Resources
3. Help mitigate demoralization – esp. in face of repeated failures/neg. consequences
4. Increase tolerance for engaging (versus denying) info about own value-discrepant

behavior. **Affirmations are the most neglected communication micro-skill.**

2. **Definition: A form of Reflective Listening; Clear, genuine words of Understanding & Appreciation;**

Affirmation is not a goal in itself, but a place to build on / from which to elicit more affirming information the person can grab hold of; Empowers the other to *Self-Affirm*. Take care to avoid delivering affirmations in a way that's likely to be received as patronizing, or a top-down judgment (albeit a positive judgment) – overly effusive or forced attempts are experienced as lacking in genuineness and the relationship will suffer. People will be angry if you try to affirm them for breathing.

3. **Focus on Describing Specific, Observed Behaviors, e.g. internal attributes, qualities & values**

(Ria: or behaviors person describes) – *not* attitudes, decisions and goals (Ria: latter provide less solid “evidence” of strengths)

4. **Avoid using the word “I”** (Ria: “I” makes the affirmation and your perceptions from the outside, instead of locating the affirmation in the person’s own perspective – the latter is harder to reject or dismiss reflexively) e.g. You seem proud of yourself – you’re beaming!

5. **Focus on Descriptions, Not Evaluations** (Ria: Judgments – positive or negative are inherently alienating and disruptive of “connection” – the “judger” alienates her/himself as well as the other. At the very least the Judger/Praiser takes a one-up position. *The antidote to Judgments:* Observe and Describe as a video camera would. E.g. you don’t say “The child tantrumed” – instead you say “When Mom said ‘no,’ he threw his body on the ground, and screamed for 5 minutes.” Or, “You didn’t give up til you nailed that high note!”)

6. **Think of Affirmations as Attributing “Interesting Qualities” to the Person** (Ria: Helps generate genuineness; mitigates impulse to praise or sugar coat matters in ways that are disempowering or inauthentic.) “You have an unrelenting sense of adventure that has allowed you to take wise risks and reap the benefits of a rich life.”

7. **Attend to Nonproblem Areas, rather than Problem Areas;** Focus on the strength/attribute, not the lack of something. Find and affirm the positive; state the affirmation positively, e.g. Instead of “You managed to avoid screaming at her when she said she’d turn the kids against you if you divorced her,” “Given all that, you still managed to stay aligned with your values -- calm and respectful.” (Ria: Redirects the person’s focus on his/her strengths, rather than the ineffective behavior that was avoided.)

8. **Nurture Person’s Competence, vs Deficit View of Self/World;** “Unsuccessful” change experiences (e.g. failure attempts), multiple negative outcomes, negativistic and/or resistant behavior can all be reframed into an affirmation (Ria: Remember “genuine” tone, rather than impulse to sugar coat or negate the person’s experience). After understanding what has been done and what worked/didn’t, affirm all the effort, persistence, strong desire for change, what *did* work, willingness despite strong reservations, etc. *The point is to then encourage building further on the strengths/resources revealed, with “how did” and “what did” questions* e.g. “How did you keep yourself calm and respectful?” “What did you do that helped you stick to your values?”

9. **Differences between Affirmations & Praise/Compliments:** Ria: Praise endorses an external locus of control – the praiser gets power from praising, rather than empowering by endorsing the *person’s internal* locus of control and *self-affirmation* (e.g. “I think you’re an honest person” vs. “You are someone who values honesty;” *Praise gives the person no useful information about what worked/didn’t work for them* (e.g. “Good Job, you did it!” tells a child or employee *nothing* about what they actually did that *worked for them*; “You finished your homework, when you really felt like watching TV. You figured out how to use watching TV as a reward you’d give yourself, if you stuck with it and finished your homework. Your big grin tells me you’re pretty proud of yourself! You finished your homework, AND you managed to watch TV!” or “You managed to prioritize a jumble of multiple tasks and got the project in

on time by identifying people's strengths, and soliciting team work in a way left everyone knowing they had something of value to contribute.")