



Building Connection and Trust: Core Engagement Skills for Milieu Practice Foundations of Engagement

Engagement is the process of building a collaborative, trusting relationship that supports participation in care and recovery. It involves respect, curiosity, consistency, and collaboration. Start small with consistent, respectful interactions (e.g., greetings, checking in, honoring choices when possible) to lay the foundation for deeper engagement.

Building Trust in the Milieu

- **Be transparent:** Explain what you're doing and why.
- **Follow through:** Keep promises, even small ones.
- **Create psychological safety:** Stay calm, validate feelings, and avoid power struggles.
- **Respect personal space and pace:** Some individuals need time and quiet before they can connect.

The OARS Communication Framework from Motivational Interviewing is a simple, powerful structure for meaningful dialogue:



Open-Ended Questions:

Invite reflection and dialogue. Example: "What's been hardest about being here today?"



Affirmations:

Recognize strengths and efforts. Example: "You've been trying really hard to stay calm even when it's frustrating."



Reflections:

Show understanding by rephrasing what you heard. Example: "It sounds like you feel staff don't listen when you need space."



Summaries:

Tie together key points to show listening and build clarity. Example: "So you want to have some quiet time after lunch before group. That helps you stay focused."

Managing Resistance and Maintaining Engagement

- **Roll with resistance:** Avoid arguing or correcting; reflect the concern instead.
- **Offer choices when possible to restore control:** Small options reduce power struggles.
- **Affirm autonomy:** Emphasize personal choice and agency when possible.
- **Reflect ambivalence:** Name mixed feelings gently to promote insight.

Quick Reminders for Every Interaction

- Be calm, consistent, and kind.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Avoid judgment or sarcasm.
- Respect personal space and boundaries.
- Small positive moments build big trust over time.

10 Quick Engagement Tips for the Milieu Connecting with Forensic and IST Patients

- 1 Lead with respect.** Every person deserves dignity, even when they're agitated or withdrawn. A respectful tone sets the foundation for safety and trust.
- 2 Introduce yourself, every time.** Patients may not remember who you are or may feel uncertain. Consistency reduces anxiety and confusion.
- 3 Start small.** Simply ask, *"How's your morning going on a scale of 1-10?"* This can open more doors than big treatment questions. Engagement grows from small, safe moments.
- 4 Offer choices to build control.** Give realistic options: *"Would you like to talk here or in the group room?"* This restores a sense of agency and may reduce power struggles.
- 5 Notice effort, not just outcomes.** Even small steps, such as coming to a group or following a direction, deserve recognition. Reinforce what's working.
- 6 Listen to understand, not to fix.** Reflect back what you hear: *"It sounds like you're feeling unheard right now."* Reflection builds validation and connection.
- 7 Avoid confrontation.** Arguing about delusions or rules usually backfires. Use calm curiosity: *"That sounds important to you. Can you tell me more to help me understand?"*
- 8 Slow down your pace.** Give time for processing. Pauses and silence can lower anxiety and model calmness.
- 9 Recognize "resistance" as self-protection.** When someone refuses care or lashes out, it's often fear or trauma showing up. Meet it with empathy, not control.
- 10 Keep showing up.** Trust is built through repetition. A consistent, calm presence, even after tough moments, teaches that safety is possible.

Trauma-Responsive Engagement

Trauma-responsive care is an organizational and clinical approach grounded in the understanding that trauma is widespread and that care environments must be structured to avoid retraumatization and promote healing.

Core to the trauma-informed framework emphasizes a shift in mindset from ***“What is wrong with you?”*** to ***“What happened to you?”*** and **assumes that every patient may have a trauma history.**

The Six Key Principles of Trauma-Informed Care (SAMHSA)

- 1 Safety** – Environment conveys physical and emotional safety.
- 2 Trustworthiness and Transparency** – Decisions and processes are clear with the goal of building and maintaining trust.
- 3 Peer Support** – Connection with others aids healing.
- 4 Collaboration** – Staff and patients work together and power differentials are leveled to support shared decision making.
- 5 Empowerment, Voice, and Choice** – Strength-based approaches that restore control.
- 6 Humility and Responsiveness** – Care acknowledges systemic trauma and disparities and biases and stereotypes are recognized and addressed.

Applying Trauma-Responsive Care in the Milieu

- Use grounding and regulation-focused interactions (slow tone, predictable routines).
- Avoid sudden directives or physical proximity that may trigger past trauma.
- Offer choices to enhance autonomy: *“Would you like to take a walk or sit together quietly?”*
- Normalize trauma responses: *“Your reaction makes sense given what you’ve been through.”*
- Maintain transparency: narrate steps before they happen.

Why This Matters for Forensic and IST Patients

- Many individuals in forensic settings have survived significant trauma (SAMHSA, 2014).
- Perceived coercion or loss of control may trigger traumatic stress.
- A trauma-responsive approach reduces aggression, elopement attempts, and self-injury.

Cultural Humility in Milieu Practice

Cultural humility is an approach that emphasizes lifelong learning, self-reflection, and respect for each patient's cultural identity and lived experience. Unlike cultural competency, which focuses on acquiring knowledge about specific groups, cultural humility centers on personal awareness and the recognition of power imbalances.

Core Principles of Cultural Humility

- **Lifelong learning and self-reflection:** Continuously examine how your own cultural background, assumptions, and biases affect interactions.
- **Recognizing and addressing power imbalances:** Patients, especially forensic and IST populations, often feel disempowered. Prioritize collaboration and shared decision-making.
- **Institutional accountability:** Advocate for systems that promote equity, reduce disparities, and create culturally responsive environments.

Practical Applications in the Milieu

- Ask open, curious questions such as, *"What would help you feel more understood right now?"*
- Avoid assumptions about a patient's beliefs, communication style, or family structure.
- Validate cultural experiences: *"It makes sense that this environment might feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable based on your past experiences."*
- Pay attention to language needs, gender identity, spiritual practices, and cultural norms related to eye contact, space, or emotional expression.



Remember: Connection before correction.
People engage when they feel seen, safe, and respected.

References

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