

## Tip # 63 Affirming

*Perhaps once in a hundred years a person  
may be ruined by excessive praise,  
but surely once every minute  
someone dies inside for lack of it.*  
Cecil G. Osborne

*Behind every difficult person or situation  
is a blessing just waiting to be revealed.*  
Cheryl Richardson

Affirming in a counseling relationship is a **type of reflection**. You selectively reflect back positive thoughts, words and actions as a way of supporting positive change.

### Some examples:

- “That’s a great idea.” Throw this one in when brainstorming food ideas.
- “I can see you already have a lot of resources and strengths.” This helps the client see what she already has in place.
- “So, you’re the kind of person who goes ahead and does something once you’ve decided to.” This affirms a process the client uses elsewhere that can be applied to health behavior changes.
- “Thank you for coming in today. I know it was not your idea to see me and I appreciate it.” This one fits when you know the client is reluctant.
- “You are dealing with a lot right now. Anyone would have trouble coping with all that.” This validates the client’s experience.

### What affirming does:

- Builds rapport
- Allows client to feel heard and appreciated
- Encourages client to further explore the change process
- Builds confidence

When you need to **set limits** with your client, it is useful to **affirm first**. For example: “That is wonderful that you can ask for help when you need it, and I am glad you find my voice on the phone supportive. I have a policy of no more than two phone calls between sessions.” This works with family members, too. “I am so glad you came along with your husband today because you clearly play a vital role in choosing what foods are in the house. Now, I need to speak with just him for a while to find out more what this means to him. I appreciate your being willing to listen in quietly. I’ll ask for your input in a few minutes.”

### Cautions:

**Overly enthusiastic affirming** can border on cheerleading. Simply worded, calm, affirming statements are stronger than you may imagine. There is no need to add extra energy to your voice or to add praise or cheerleading statements,

such as “Good for you,” “Keep it up,” “I’m proud of you,” “That’s great that you followed your plan for a whole week” (with a big smile). Staying more neutral will keep the client in charge. For example: “So, you’ve followed this plan for a week. You hadn’t been very confident you could do that. How are you feeling now?” Some clients are people-pleasers and will respond to praise by trying to elicit more praise from you. Reflecting back neutral affirmations minimizes this risk.

There is a potential **trap of affirming the change side** so much that the client goes into defending no change and you find yourself arguing. If this happens, you can quickly even it out by reflecting back both sides (see Tip #55, Ambivalence).

Practice:

- Look for and affirm expressions of confidence: “I know I can at least ask for dressing on the side.” Affirm it: “So that’s something you know you can do.”
- Attune your attention to client strengths and efforts even if they have not yielded results yet. “You are really observing all the steps that happen before a binge.”
- Take the time to affirm changes that have already been made, discoveries, any progress. Don’t assume the client notices and celebrates them.

As with all types of mirroring, affirming can seem unnecessary or redundant. If you have not been affirming much, it will feel odd at first. Throw in a few affirmations in your next few sessions and observe the results.