Reading Between the Lines: Decoding Nonverbal Cues (CBT, SST)

Objective:
Help clients identify and interpret common nonverbal social cues (e.g., facial expressions, tone of voice, body language) to improve social understanding and interactions.

Introduction (5 minutes)

Start with a warm-up game or question like:

Therapist Prompt:
"Let's play a quick game: I'm going to act out a feeling just using my face or hands—no words! You guess what I'm trying to show. Then you can try one too!"

This breaks the ice and sets the stage for exploring how people communicate without saying a word.

Psychoeducation (10–12 minutes)

Therapist Prompt:
"Most of what we say doesn't come out of our mouths—it comes from our face, hands, eyes, and even how we stand or move. That's called *nonverbal communication.* It's like a secret second language that helps us understand how someone feels, even if they don't say it."

You can share examples like:

- **Facial expressions**: Raised eyebrows can mean surprise or confusion. A frown might mean someone is upset or concentrating.

- **Body posture**: Arms crossed can signal someone is closed off or unsure. Leaning in can show interest.

- **Tone of voice**: Saying "I'm fine" in a flat voice might actually mean the opposite!

Therapist Tip: For younger clients or visual learners, bring in flashcards, emojis, or short video clips showing different facial expressions and tones of voice. Pause and discuss each one.

Normalize the difficulty:

"Lots of people—even adults—sometimes miss these cues. That's okay. What we're doing today is practicing ways to notice them more clearly."

Skill Building Activity (15–18 minutes)

Activity Title: "What's Really Going On?"

Give the client a worksheet with 4–6 illustrated or written scenarios (included below) and ask them to match the *nonverbal clue* with the most likely *emotion or meaning.*

Example scenarios:

1. **A person is smiling, but their arms are tightly crossed, and they keep looking at the clock.**
   Possible emotions: Nervous, uncomfortable, in a hurry.

2. **Someone rolls their eyes while saying "great."**
   Possible emotions: Sarcastic, annoyed.

3. **A person is sitting with slumped shoulders, looking at the floor.**
   Possible emotions: Sad, tired, discouraged.

Therapist Prompt:
"Let's walk through each situation together. What's the first thing you notice? How can you tell how they're really feeling?"

Encourage flexible thinking:

"Sometimes, people's faces say one thing, but their bodies or tone say something else. We're like detectives figuring out the clues."

Optional Add-ons:

- Use mirrors or role-play to act out expressions together.

- If working with a group, play charades with emotions or social situations.

Reflection and Discussion (5 minutes)

Use open-ended questions to guide insight:

- "Was there anything tricky about today's activity?"

- "What clues did you find easiest to notice? Which were harder?"

- "How might knowing these clues help you in real life—like at school, work, or with friends?"

Tie it back to real-world use:

"Noticing nonverbal cues can help us figure out when someone's upset, happy, bored, or needs space. That can make conversations feel easier."

Homework Options (Pick One)

1. **Nonverbal Detective Journal**
   Observe someone during the day and write down 3 nonverbal cues they showed. What do you think each one meant?

2. **TV or YouTube Body Language Tracker**
   Watch a scene from a show or video. Hit pause and describe the person's face, voice, or posture. What emotion do you think they're feeling?

3. **Mirror Practice**
   Stand in front of a mirror and try out different facial expressions. Write or draw what each expression means to you. Try: happy, frustrated, confused, and excited.

Worksheet: "What's Really Going On?" – Nonverbal Clues Practice

Instructions: Look at the scenarios below and match each person's behavior with what you think they might be feeling. There are no right or wrong answers—just your best guess!

Scenario	What You Notice	What Might They Be Feeling?
1	Smiling, arms crossed, glancing at clock	_____ _____
2	Loud voice, eyes wide, quick hand movements	_____ _____
3	Rolling eyes, saying "Great…" slowly	_____ _____
4	Slumped shoulders, no eye contact	_____ _____

5	Leaning forward, nodding, smiling	_____ _____

Bonus: Draw one of the faces or poses that you think shows a clear emotion!