

Q. Certain people seem very reactive to process techniques. They perceive it as a manipulative kind of thing.

A. First of all, there are no such things as process techniques. A process orientation means that the therapist uses interventions which address what is happening, rather than what is being said. A process orientation does not favor any particular kind of intervention over another.

Secondly, if someone is reactive, work with their reaction.

Well, I prefer to sit back and reach into an empathic comment. For example, when someone balks, I might say, "Yeah, it's good for you to say, 'No' right now. You didn't have a chance to say, 'No' back then. How is that for you now?"

In the example you give here, you are attending to process. You choose an intervention which invites the person to explore themselves in the here and now. You use, as an enactment, the relationship between you and the client. Your choice is founded on your intuitive sense, your belief system, and your experience. A wide range of interventions could be clinically defended here which would all have, as their foundation, the therapist's awareness of process rather than content.

Any technique is manipulative if the therapist has an investment in the outcome. For example, if you named this woman's process and showed empathy in order that she (fill in the blank), then even *your* intervention was manipulative.

I guess I mean directive, not process.

Even, "How is that for you?" can be interpreted as the implied directive: "Answer this question."

Well, I wouldn't need her to answer the question. It would be alright if she hadn't.

The difference between directive and agendized is intent. So the reason your question was not directive was because you did not have an agenda for anyone else but yourself. You did not need her to answer the question for you. You thought if

she answered the question for herself, the answer might be useful to her. You were not invested in the outcome.

And whether she answered your question or not, you were prepared to make your next therapeutic move based on her response. Even though she still might have perceived that you were demanding something of her or were manipulating her toward a certain outcome, the fact that you were not invested or manipulative was determined not by your behavior or your words, but by your underlying motivation. ♪

Q. I don't understand about "not being in the system." If they respond to something I've done or said, then I'm in their system.

A. From the client's point of view, you are always in his system. That is partly what transference is about. He perceives you as wanting, expecting, liking, judging, pushing, withholding, knowing more than he does, and/or generally being as involved as he is in his life. Frequently, he may get your presence mixed up with a part of himself. I suggest you consistently make the conscious choice to be separate from the dysfunctional system he has come to psychotherapy to explore. Hold the frame that you and everything else in the room are a blank mirror for the client to project onto. Keep in mind that when he looks at you, he does not see *you*, he sees only a mirror of himself.

But if we invite in a certain direction like 'self-awareness,' isn't that expecting, pushing, telling him what to do?

You can competently apply any psychotherapeutic technique, invite him to do pretty much anything, have any psychotherapeutic theory about how people heal, be active in session, be passive in session, even act "as if" you have an agenda for him, as long as you don't actually have an agenda for him. Instead, have the intent that *you* invite him to connect with and explore himself.

Isn't that having an agenda for him—to connect with and explore himself, I mean?



Working With Couples—#414

You: So look at him/her and say, "What I want right now is..."

Him/Her: "What I want right now is...
...uh..."

In a relationship, it is relatively easy to name what we *don't* want. It is often more difficult to say what we *do* want. Learning to introspect and verbalize a want-in-the-moment is a skill that takes time to develop. In session, do not expect all people to find it an easy task. Patiently keep inviting their attention back to the present moment.

A person might take a year before they have internal permission to know what they want *right now*, let alone how to articulate it. In session, your task is to keep asking and work with the response.

Sometimes we are frightened to ask for specific behaviors from a partner because:

- We might find out for sure, right now, we are never going to get what we want.
- We might find out what we always suspected: what we want is unreasonable and we don't deserve it.
- We believe if we have to ask for it, it doesn't count. The only thing that counts is if the partner thinks it up themselves.
- We might actually get what we want. Then we may find ourselves still dissatisfied and have to address the real problem—that we basically don't like the other person, that we don't want to acknowledge our part in the problem, or that we don't want to be the one to have to take action in order to improve the quality of our life.
- We might have to give up dependency and take responsibility—super yuck.

Carol Nichols Hadlock

No. Have an agenda for *yourself* (not him) that you apply your psychotherapeutic theory in the psychotherapy session. Because your psychotherapeutic model is what he is paying you for.

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Q. She was working on how her father was never there for her and all of a sudden, she started weeping and feeling guilty about an abortion she had years ago.

A. People tend to minimize the effect that past trauma has had on their lives. They focus instead on trying to figure out intellectual solutions to current problems. Unwanted responses to experiences are banned from consciousness until similar life circumstances call them forward again. Much to the astonishment of the bearer, they often return in a tsunami-type emotional rush.

□ Get in the habit of inviting the exploration of uncomfortable subjects such as child abuse, abandonment, assault, battery, abortion, war experiences, the perpetration of abuse on others, death, and other trauma. Pay particular attention to incongruities. When your intuition nudges you with a wondering-about or a memory, “wonder” out-loud, again.

(the next week) When she spoke from the viewpoint of a baby she lost when she was young, the baby was very angry that she didn’t take better care of herself.

Part of her resolution may be to accept the baby’s anger and to experience the full extent of her guilt for, as she defines it, her irresponsibility. Among other things, she will also experience anger and grief that she had to take responsibility in the first place, that immaturity exists, that things die on this planet, and that she has very little control over anything at all.

Eventually she may decide she needs to punish herself for the rest of her life, or she may accept that she is imperfect and quite capable of behaving in ways which do not take other people into consideration and indeed may be fatal to them.

Keep in mind when she speaks from the point of view of the miscarried (lost) baby, that she speaks from her fantasy of what this lost baby might think. That fantasy is her projection of the lost-baby part of herself. And the lost-baby part of herself is angry at the lost-parent (immature?) part of herself.

Perhaps as this woman begins to accept and forgive the imperfections of her youth, she will detach from wanting her father to be different, let go of her anger, and begin to free herself from dependency, other people’s judgment, and systemic low self-esteem.

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Q. What’s wrong with being countertransferred anyway? I thought it was okay, as long as you used it somehow, in session.

A. I’m hearing you say that it is therapeutically sound to be angry at a client, have expectations of and agendas for his behavior, be afraid of him, judge him, want him to like you, demand that he respond to you, get upset if he does not do what you think he should do, foist your belief systems on him or respond to him from your Child or Parent ego state as long as you tell him about it and then use his reaction therapeutically in

some way. Am I correct?

Well...(thinks), yes.

A person comes to psychotherapy to flow freely from moment to moment and safely be judgmental, childish, grandiose, critical, needy, and have uncertain boundaries. When the therapist is judgmental, childish, critical, grandiose, needy, or has uncertain boundaries also, where is the safety in that? Since every therapist manifests those attributes from time to time, our job is to be aware of our occasional loose boundaries and find a way to transcend them.

Why should he leave his home, get in his car, drive across town, and pay money to spend an hour in the same environmental container which caused him to seek psychotherapy in the first place?

Humans learn to value themselves by introjecting how valued they are by their primary objects. The first time a client was parented, his parents had agendas and expectations. They wanted him to like them; they judged him and demanded that he respond to them. They got angry at and were afraid of him; they got upset when he did not do what they wanted. They foisted their belief systems onto him and often came from their Child ego states when they communicated with him. With their uncertain boundaries, they often could not tell where

they left off and he began.

Why should he leave his home, get in his car, drive across town, and pay money to spend an hour in the same environmental container which caused him to seek psychotherapy in the first place?

Since much of psychotherapy is a re-parenting process, offer a different parenting experience than your client had his first time around. Give him an opportunity to celebrate his life in an environment where the unfolding of his self esteem is the highest priority.

Come from a frame of unconditional positive regard. It is not bad to be countertransferred, but while you are, your needs muddy up the therapeutic environment and they get in the way by taking the focus off the resolution of the other person’s issues.

It seems unrealistic to have as your goal never to be countertransferred, so consider instead, working towards resolving or transcending the issues that cause you to countertransfer.

If, very occasionally, you are unable to keep your own agendas and issues out of the session, *then* create a way to use your lapse therapeutically. Usually, the most expeditious thing to do is to declare the problem briefly and immediately put the focus of attention back on the other person.

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Q. She told me about a cat being tortured. If I feel horror, how about sharing that in session?

A. Sure. And then invite her focus of attention back on herself. **But if you have an emotion in session, aren’t you taking away from the other person’s feeling and diminishing the available intensity?**

To the extent that you react emotionally to the content in session, you may indeed be obstructing the person’s full access to his own horror. Existential sadness that torture happens in the universe is, in my opinion, a sign of sanity and a way of celebrating your humanity.

If you can put your horror (or other emotion) aside during session, do so. If you cannot, declaring it can often lessen its intensity so you can be more present in the session.

☐ Trust that best of therapeutic tools—your Self. Use your reaction as an intervention.

"I'm horrified. What's it like to be telling this story to someone who responds like I do.?"

☐ Assume your reaction represents one of her personality parts.
"Is there a part of you who is horrified too?"

☐ Assume a polarity part exists also.

"Speak from the part of you who has no response at all (or who perceives the incident as somewhat normal under the circumstances)."

(a week later) I told my friend what you said and she thought that if a counselor didn't have an emotion about the cat torturing, that counselor needs to go to therapy!

To me, temporary existential sadness seems different from feeling the sadness that belongs to someone else. For example, have you ever been in a group where you were, perhaps, a bit annoyed about something pertaining to the group when all of sudden, someone *else* erupted in disagreement and annoyance.

Next time that happens, pay attention to how relieved you are that someone else has spoken up and now you don't have to. The same thing can happen in a psychotherapy session. Similarly, sometimes when a client is having a difficult time experiencing a particular emotion, it's because she perceives she doesn't have to—because you're doing it for her.

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Q. He whines and complains and wants me to tell him what to do. He also always wants to be the biggest and best bad-guy and whatever I suggest, it's not good enough. So I finally said, "Okay I give up, I don't know what to do. I guess you're just bigger than my ability to fix you." It felt mean.

A. So the "bigger" was sarcastic?

Yes.

And for a moment, there were no adults in the room—just a couple of tall kids?

Yes. (laughs and shakes head)

If you hadn't been attached to the outcome (wanting him to feel bad), your intervention might have been a very useful way to invite this man to be more aware, either of himself or his relationship with you. What are you so angry at this person about?

For whining and complaining. During his sessions I often think, "Stop saying you're going to do this or that; you aren't really gonna do it."

☐ One idea is to use your thought as an intervention.

"Okay, that's what you say you're going to do. Now say it all again and add, "However, I'm not really gonna do it.""

Or,

"Now let the part of you speak who is committed to do everything possible so that what you just said, never happens."

☐ Get on board the whining and complaining train. Around the office we occasionally have a "national whining day." Whenever somebody whines on that day, the polite response is any version of, "Well ya got *that* right!"

♣ Find the positive intent behind wanting you (or anybody else) to tell him what to do. Encourage him to be the best bad guy he can be, and to increase his efforts to make certain that he never, ever, take any of your suggestions.

Complaining is often an acting-out of the misery one is not in touch with.

☐ Invite him to pay attention to his somatic experience while he is whining and complaining.

♣ *"Say those words again and notice your body's experience as you say them...Describe your experience. Be curious—say the words again...and follow the experience. What's happening now?"*

Often, the intervention of choice for someone who is addicted to their dysfunction is to speculate paradoxically (from a perspective of unconditional regard, of course) that they are simply not miserable enough yet to change.

☐ Invite this person to experience the full extent of his discomfort. In time he may get so uncomfortable he will choose to do something different.

♣ Invite him to lie on the floor and breathe and feel, and breathe and feel, and...

♣ Invite him to whine and complain more.

"Say everything you can think of that you resent. Say the words, "I resent that..." before each thing on the list."

♣ Use sandtray, art, or other interventions besides words.

☐ Invite him back into his childhood.

"Go back to a time when someone gave up on you...Be there now...How old are you?...What's going on?...What do you notice about yourself?...What do you need?...Find a way to respond differently this time."

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Q. The husband complains she drags around this huge stockpile of blame for his past actions.

A. He is probably quite accurate. And, of course, he is tattling on and blaming her right now.

☐ Invite him to attend to his own stockpile instead of hers.

☐ Invite her to acknowledge the part of his accusation that is true.

☐ Set up a structure where one blames and the other counters with, "I'm never going to change."

☐ Choose objects (pillows are wonderful for this) that can be stockpiled to represent past actions she is still angry about. Let her physically hold them all. One by one, invite her to name each annoying action specifically. Suggest she let go of the ones she is willing, resolve her anger from rage to completion regarding

some of the others, and identify the rest as those she chooses to continue hanging onto.

- Suggest he do the same.
- Invite him to set her free.
- ☞ Suggest he take the whole angry stockpile from her, bundle it, then drag it around in her place. After all, somebody has to be ticked-off that he did those things.

□ Encourage him to own his responses, and to make himself the star of his comments.

You to him: Look at your partner and repeat after me: "I feel so discouraged. I want to stop being punished for being a jerk in the past. In fact, I want you to appreciate me for changing and thank me for that at least three times a day."

Direct all external observations inward.

□ "...and how is that (the thing you just noticed in the other person) like a part of yourself?"

In the unconscious hope that we can finally work it through to a different conclusion, most of us restage the relationship we had with our parents over and over, each time selecting different people with whom to act out the original roles.

□ Work with each of them individually. Invite them to start by making guesses regarding which of their childhood memories involve being blamed by others.

☞ Wonder about and invite the exploration of how fall-out from his/her childhood is still present in their current relationship(s).

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Q. (Sigh) I have tried everything I can with this court ordered teenaged male. I have really worked hard with this client, but he just doesn't want to be in therapy.

A. If you want him to want to be in therapy, not only are you working too hard, you are working harder than he is.

I thought I was supposed to come up with different and interesting ways to invite him to be introspective.

Perhaps he thinks he is supposed to come up with different and interesting ways to avoid being introspective.

Approaching interventions with the attitude of, "Well, that didn't work, so now I'll try something else," you assume that something is *supposed* to work, and that Somebody is not doing it right.

□ Talk with him frankly. Tell him you have done everything you know to do. Ask him to help you out.

In the unconscious hope that we can finally work it through to a different conclusion, most of us restage, over and over, the relationship we had with our parents, each time selecting different people with whom to act out the original roles.

☞ "Since you have to be here, what should we do?"

☞ "Since you have to be here, how would you like to spend the time?"

□ Rather than inviting him to connect with himself, invite him to connect with you. Focus your attention on the relationship between you. Be different than everyone else he knows. Tell the truth and have no agenda for how he should live his life.

The only time he liked it was when I worked paradoxically with him.

Within the limits of your personality, tailor your interventions according to the needs and abilities of the client. If this particular person is willing to work only in a paradoxical frame, do that and nothing else, for now.

□ "This is counseling. Stop having fun."

□ "And no laughing."

□ "And whatever else you do in here, do not tell me anything about yourself."

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Q. (Sigh) I went into session and couldn't remember their names.

A. What a wonderful example of how the organism gets a message to the intellect. Until you know differently, assume that whatever is going on with you has something to do with what is going on with the patient. What was going on with you?

Identity?

Okay, Family processes that reflect identity often involve...?

Uh, boundaries, who I am right now,...

□ So tailor your interventions to address those arenas.

Like what?

□ "Each of you re-introduce yourself. Take some time to describe how you are the same-as and different-from how you used to be and from each of the other people in this family right now."

I was just embarrassed that I couldn't remember the names.

And you let your embarrassment get in your way?

Not too much, but I couldn't think of an intervention that felt right.

□ In session, one idea is to model telling the truth when you find yourself in an embarrassing

situation.

"I'm feeling a little embarrassed right now—my brain is blanking on your names. Please refresh my memory."

If you cannot transcend your response, a useful intervention is to name it, take responsibility for it, then put the attention back on the other person. Most of the time you will find that naming it will provide some space for you to get separate from it.

□ "What's going on right now is that I can't remember any of your names. I like to trust that what happens with me in here has something to do with how you are together. So..."

☞ "What's it like to have a counselor who can't remember your names?"

☞ "Introduce yourselves to me again. Pay attention to how you are different from the first time you came here."

Second only to fear, embarrassment (a.k.a. shame) is the biggest impediment to accessing and using your inner guidance in session.

Actually, if it had been all right with you *not* to know their names, you needn't have had a problem.

□ When your emotional response takes your attention off the client's process, first breathe and see if you can let go of it until later. If you can, find a way to use your emotion in *their* work.

☞ "Who in your family (who else in your life, what part of you) doesn't have a clue who you really are?"

☞ "Let's travel back in time to when you first met... Now introduce yourselves all over again... This time tell the Rest of the truth."

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Q. A four-year-old has been kicked out of three preschools because of his angry tantrums. Basically, his mother neglects him. She spends maybe ten minutes per day with him. She complains she has trouble getting him to do what she wants.

A. Temper tantrums seem to be a natural phenomena common to immature humans confronting the existential fact that they are not the center of the universe and that they cannot always have what they want.

Support this boy in an environment of clear, but loving limits as he works through this grieving process. It speaks well for his self esteem that he bothers to rage. The fact that he has very little control over anything but himself is probably as hard for him to accept as it is for his mother.

It sounds as if the boy needs a safe place to rage. If mother and son will come in to session together, there will be an additional fifty minutes per week that this boy will have his mother's attention.

Create a safe container for anger in your office, perhaps a specific corner or chair.

"In this room, it's okay to be as angry as you like over there in the corner with the pillows on the floor. You can yell, you can kick, you can hit. Would you like to do that now?"

If you're feeling fairly free and comfortable with your own mental health, go over to said corner, sit down on the pillows, kick your legs, pump your fists, and yell, *"I want what I want Right Now. I'm mad. I'm mad. I'm mad."* Then ask the Mom and/or the son to join you. Let it be okay if neither does.

Direct the boy to pretend he is having a tantrum. Reinforce any safe behavior that is non-abusive. Encourage him to do more of everything while he pretend-tantrums, then hugs all around and no judgment afterwards.

While all this is going on, show the mother how to set limits to protect both herself and her son. Direct the mother and son to experiment together. The son will have fun teaching his mother what to do.

Invite the boy and the mother to agree upon the part of their house in which it's okay to be angry.

Should they develop a supportive response that the mother is capable of making and which also meets the needs of the boy, they can spend time practicing.

Suggest they take a few minutes at home everyday while the boy pretends to have a tantrum and the mother practices nurturing, supportive responses. Then vice versa—mom has tantrum and her son supports her.

Another excellent technique is called a holding. In a holding the parent restrains the child's body while protecting both herself and the child. The child has a safe and loving container within which to rage and release. The parent is supported as they learn to stay in neutrality and not to personalize. Bonding occurs, a clear hierarchy is established and both parent and child perceive that Someone is in control. You can download a manual at processes.org/self-help-resources/parenting/process-holding/

Teach the mother how to reward positive behavior and, except for safety, to ignore negative behavior. In this case, I'd suggest the Mother has to learn 1) to make certain he can't hurt himself

or her, then 2) to ignore him completely from the moment he loses it, then 3) the moment he stops, to appear in front of him with lots of hugs, friendly talking, kind eyes, and her mental as well as emotional presence.

Invite this mother to be seen individually. Once she gets some of her own needs met by spending intimate time with and attending to her own Inner Child, she may feel less neglected herself and be more inclined to be intimate with and attend to her external child.

If the mother will not come in with her child, teach the child to have a safe temper tantrum anyway. Use the pretend-tantrum method. Take over the parent role and set limits for safety. The child can tell you what supportive words to say. Eventually, he may introject both the safety and the support.



Q. More suggestions, please for working with a passive teen.

A. Stop working so hard. Find a way to open both your heart your mind. See him though a lens of unconditional positive regard.

Give up wanting him to be not-passive.

Within safety limits, allow everything—need nothing.

Talk with him frankly. Tell him you have done everything you know to do. Ask him to help you out.

Delete the technique of question-asking from your repertoire of things to do.

Wonder' a lot—with no expectations of a response.

Tell stories as an indirect way to validate, empathize and suggest alternatives.

Engage him in other-than-verbal ways.

Throw pillows at each other.

Play cards or other games.

With anything from plastic soldiers to multiple found objects around the therapy room, invite a military engagement.

Art. Any kind. Anyway it can happen given the room you're in and the supplies at hand.

Get the sand tray out. You can use it if he doesn't.

Find out how high the two of you can stack all the stuff in the room.

Write about your experience of being with him. Read it to him. Give it to him. Be okay when he rejects it.

On Becoming a Psychotherapist

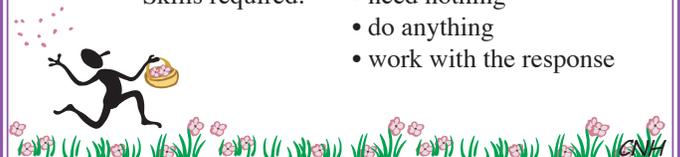
Basic job description

Invite the person to:

- connect with the here & now
- introspect
- allow his experience

Skills required:

- need nothing
- do anything
- work with the response



Sit quietly for an whole session. Maybe more.

Crack jokes for fifty minutes.

Engage in a lecture about responsibly celebrating one's sexuality at no one else's expense.

With his permission, talk about things that interest you. Bring in your collection of whatever and engage in show and tell.

Let him teach you about things he's interested in.

Tell about real or made up metaphorical teen experiences as you guess they relate to the person in front of you.

Q. Dad reaches out and the son rejects. The son enjoys watching his father squirm.

A. Use your description to make images in your mind. Listen to yourself and notice the verbs. Empty your mind and move into your description. Pay attention to your experience as you imagine you are, in this case, a reach-outer, a rejecter, or a squirm-watcher.

Invite nonabusive anger work.

Enact the process physically. Direct the father to reach out to his son with his hands. Invite the son to show how he doesn't want his dad to connect with him.

Intensify the process. Invite the son to find a way to get his father to squirm even more. Wonder if Dad could reach out in such a way that his son rejects him entirely.

Why would you accelerate the process like that? In hopes that something will happen?

Find the place in you who understands that neither of us knows what is best for this family. Once there, look at this family from the frame that the universe (and the family) is unfolding as it should.

Trusting that they know more than you do about which process is right for them, invite them to do what they are doing, more, with more consciousness, with exaggeration, perhaps moving toward the extreme.

Invite them to intensify their process with the possible outcome that they will reach the end of it sooner, rather than later. Invite their discovery of what lies on the other side in the safe container of a psychotherapy session and with a positive

regarding witness (you) in the room.

Q. She cries and cries. There doesn't seem to be any end to it. It just goes on and on.

A. I'll start with your perception that there's "no end to it." Crying does not always signify sadness. Sometimes the behavior you see is not attached to the

... 'connected-with' sorrow...is the sorrow that, when fully experienced...no longer needs to be guarded against or acted-out.

emotion you would reasonably interpret from it.

Begin by inviting this woman to experience any emotion she speaks of, refers to, or allows herself in session. I'm guessing she's more angry than sad.

But if she's just crying ...?

Based on your response to her, I'd guess she is not "just" crying. Neither of us has to guess correctly to intervene. If you are wrong, she will let you know.

According to you, she's not connected to the crying, so invite her to be connected to another emotion. Invite her to work through any layers of emotion that protect her from connecting with the part of herself that, frequently, only other people know about.

So what do I say to this woman?

Use the same suggestions and phrases you might use to encourage any person to connect with their on-going experience in the moment and then release it.

"Stay conscious."

"Follow your experience."

"Surrender to your experience."

"Allow it (whatever 'it' is)."

"Let that happen," (the thing she just mentioned)

"Allow it to pass through you."

"Let it go."

"Sadness comes in waves. It leaves at it's own speed. Stay with it 'til it's gone."

"Lie down (flat surface, pillow under bent knees). Breathe from your diaphragm (mouth open, big breaths). Keep breathing deeply and let the tears come as they want to."

"Name the saddest things in your life."

"Crying doesn't seem to be working for you. Do something different. Say how (mad, sad, glad, scared, bad) you are."

"Here's a tennis racket. Whack this pillow while you cry. Say something like, 'I'm mad that I'm so sad' while you do it."

"Tell the long list of 'I-resents' while you cry. Include everything you can think of that you don't like."

"Say out-loud the long list of I'm-afraid-of's while you cry. Include everything you can think of that scares you."

"Name the other things that frustrate you? All the things you want but you can't have. Start each sentence with, "I."

"Show me just how frustrated you are."

"Make a sound while you do that..." "Put words to the sounds you're making... louder."

Anger is often easier to access in session than shame or fear because it is more readily available in the muscles.

The grief that often follows a release of anger is usually what I call 'connected-with' grief. This is the sorrow that, when fully experienced, is apparently completed and no longer needs to be guarded against or acted-out.

So when they cry after they are angry, that sadness is done with?

Wouldn't that be nice. It's just a metaphor, but imagine that feelings could be measured in volume. Then imagine that after a connection with anger, the amount of grief experienced is exactly proportional to the amount of rage felt and released beforehand.

Q. I run a resentful, court-mandated group. Would you suggest play as an intervention for them?

A. Sure. I suggest you begin by attending to your observation that this is a resentful group. Use that idea.

You might begin every session by directing them to line up. (You might even have every one get in line before they enter the room at the beginning of session.) Then one at a time, each person takes the plastic bat or tennis racket that you brought, walks to the middle of the room and whacks the heck out of the futon, pillow, or cushion positioned there.

As a group exercise, suggest they also find the words that express exactly how much they do *Not* want to be here, how much they *resent* the justice system,

Termination Day

by Amanda Morgan, LMFT

I have worked with VT for 9 short months at her high school. In that time, she has cried before me, yelled at me, looked inside of herself, and even walked out of the room in a fit of anger. She and I had shared the most honesty of all my clients this year. Today was our last day, and she was not doing well. A relapse on marijuana, another domestic violence incident with her live-in gangster boyfriend, another job opportunity fallen through.

My heart swelled with the following: sympathy—her parents were themselves addicts who had denied that VT’s neighbor had raped her when she was 10; more sympathy—no one has taught her how to take care of herself, she’s been homeless for 3 years, and she is about to graduate high school in one week; disappointment—what about all the “progress” we’d made in counseling?; anger—“I’ve invested myself in caring about you, and you seem to be right back where we started!,”; curiosity—“will she ever realize that beautiful spark of life in her heart?”; letting go—she is not mine, and she will find her way; “need nothing, only love as is, right here, right now”; wonder—“how can she stay in this abusive relationship?!”—self-nurturing, “she is on her path and will learn in her own way; again, let go and love.”

Here are some things I learned from this young client:

1. Name What is True Now (even if Now was 3 weeks ago!). After yelling at me and storming out of my room because I’d called CPS (though I’d explained I

was mandated to do so and even offered to do it with her in the room), she ignored my attempts to call her back in for a few weeks. Eventually, she came in and began to speak as though nothing had happened. “Wait a sec, V,” I’d said. My heart was pounding, despite my breathing into it. “You were pretty upset with me last time we met. You walked out. Do you remember?” To my surprise, she was more able to talk about the incident than I was! She explained what had pissed her off, and from there we opened up a long list of people who had betrayed her in her life, and I was able to successfully reframe the “betrayal” to care and recognition. She hadn’t even known how to recognize care when it was happening, she had been so very mistrustful of the world. It was she who suggested that I cared about her more than she herself did, since I would even attempt to tell the police of her rape. A profound discovery, unearthed by a simple naming of the truth.

2. Be Close, but do not Scorch. One of my favorite metaphors is from the book, “The Alchemist” by Paulo Coelho. The Sun tells the book’s hero that the love between the Earth and Sun is dependent upon the distance between them. Earth basks in the Sun’s loving light and receives its nutrition, while giving the Sun its reason for being—to nourish. If the Sun were to move even an inch closer, though, the Earth would fry. The 93 million miles that separate the parts of the symbiosis must remain so. I felt I was able at times to “nourish” VT with loving, non-judging presence, but now that she has walked out of my door for the last time, and without showing much emotion,

I am hoping she finds—and accepts—the next loving light that shine toward her. I admit it was a struggle to maintain professional boundaries and not to fling advice and the relative “wisdom” of my experiences beyond hers; at times she seemed so desperate and unloved that I wanted to cradle her, give her money, food, fill out job applications for her, etc. This was a great lesson in loving from a necessary distance, and I am grateful to VT for that.

3. Trust the Process; Trust the Client. All of the swirling inner experiences I mentioned in the first paragraph above flowed together until an inner voice said, “It’s all ok.” I can feel sad for this client, sad for myself, even, that I will no longer learn with her. Although I wish for VT a loving community, self esteem, inner strength and wisdom, I trust that she will collect these things—to whatever extent serves her—when the time is right. My experience of our time together may not match hers (she’d named her highlights of our hours—things I’d forgotten, or that she’d made her own meaning out of), so I trust that she has taken what she needed from my attention and let the rest go. Letting go requires trust—the same trust I’d hoped she would allow herself in order to approach me in the first place. I will never see VT again. I will turn the care I held for her back inward now, tending to myself, trusting myself to go through this again and again throughout this career, trusting this snail’s-paced process of love, acknowledgement, and acceptance.

how *angry* they are with (whatever). You (or one of the group members might write the words on the black or white board. Spelling doesn’t count.

Bring news print and finger paint. Let ‘em draw their feelings—Show and Tell after.

Psychodrama: ask them to line-up in order: baddest to nicest; most resentful to least.

I’d probably arrange family of origin sculpts. There are many ways to direct a sculpt. One by one and over several sessions, each group member (I’ll name the first one, ‘Joe’) picks individuals

in the group to stand in for members of his family of origin, i.e. parents, siblings, other important figures, and himself. With your participation, Joe positions people according to his view of how they relate to each other. He might even tell each group member a little about the person they are standing in for. In return, they might tell the group what it’s like to be an individual in this family.

I like that idea. I’m a little hesitant though...

Try it. You’ll probably make a mess of the first few sculpts you arrange—just like the mess these men have made out of their lives. Make mistakes on purpose. Be a role model. Laugh at

yourself and get their suggestions on how to do better. The group members will experience a leader who doesn't collapse into shame around imperfection. And you'll become more skilled as you use your mistakes in the work.

♩

Q. An older, dependent woman won't leave her husband, yet he can't meet her needs.

A. So you think if he cannot meet her needs, she should leave him?

Well ...

Let go of your notion that you have even a clue about what someone else ought to do with their life.

□ Find opportunities to invite her to define what she wants from herself (as opposed to what she wants from her husband).

☞ Then invite her to explore how, within the parameters she allows herself, she can get what she wants.

☞ Invite her to notice how often she blames her husband for the negative quality of her life.

□ Instead of participating in her search for solutions, invite her to explore how she manages not to expedite any of the solutions she and her friends come up with.

□ Reframe her dilemma positively. Suggest she trust herself completely. Perhaps the benefits of staying with this man outweigh the risks of changing.

□ Invite her to accept herself the way she is [regardless of what you or I think].

☞ "Yes, I am dependent. My needs are not met, yet I'm not ready to leave him."

☞ "I enjoy having someone around to blame for everything."

☞ "I love hating him."

☞ "(It's a tough job but ...) my appointed role in life is to get him to be different than he is."

♩

Q. They don't know what to do. Nothing I suggest gives this family a permanent replacement for their dysfunctional behavior patterns.

A. Your therapeutic task is not to replace someone else's dysfunctional behavior patterns; your task is to create an environment where the someone-else is invited to become aware of behavior patterns, decide to replace them, (or not)

and discover how they resist behavior patterns that are functional.

Normally, a family will begin acting out both the functional and dysfunctional parts of their system as early as the intake session.

□ Call their attention to these family-created enactments. Alternative communication devices can be suggested on the spot.

☞ "One of the first things I notice about this family is... Is that true? I wonder what would happen if... Let's try that right now."

This family may have named you "IT" in their game of "Yes, but... "

□ If that is true, one way to remove yourself from this no-win place is by relentlessly encouraging each person to take responsibility for creating solutions to their own problems.

☞ "What's Your part in this not working?"

☞ "What can You do to get what you want?"

□ To make a process more concrete, enact it physically in the session.

☞ Each time you have an idea, invite the family to role play your idea. Then invite them to tell you why it will not work.

☞ When they do not know why your idea will not work, wonder out loud what each of them might have to do in order for your suggestion to work.

□ Consciously join the system.

☞ Take over the family's "Gee, I dunno what to do" component. That might free up one or more family members to take on the role of Answer Person.

□ If ultimately, nobody in the family can figure out what to do, accelerate the process of "not figuring out."

☞ Wonder (out loud of course) if perhaps the family is doomed to misery, a psychological anomaly with no hope.

What if they believe you?

If they believe you, it will be because what you say has truth for them.

Another possibility is that once they believe there is no hope in trying to get the Other-Guy to change, they may decide to accept each other the way they are, which will automatically clean up a lot of the dysfunction.

Or they may leave feeling victorious because they have successfully convinced

an expert to give them permission to dissolve the marriage.

Or they may join forces against you, find another counselor who is better, and arrange that this new person will tell them to do whatever they have been wanting to be told to do all along. None of this will have anything to do with you.

Give up any beliefs you have that your responsibility is to get this family to change. Invite them instead to become aware of the system they have created and how they each contribute to the maintenance of that system.

Understand that even after you have done your job, they may still choose their current system over all other alternatives.

♩

Q. I've been seduced. I haven't set or kept firm limits. I have been deceived, unappreciated, and now I'm really angry.

A. You have been enrolled in a lab class titled Countertransference 1A: Treating Your Fantasy Rather than Seeing and Treating Who S/He Really Is. That is a tough course.

♩

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