



Dear friends and colleagues,  
I'm excited to share this new publication with you. My hope is that we provide a space for the discussion and possible subsequent expansion of all our minds regarding treatments issues in the art of family psychotherapy.

As we begin, our contributors are staff members and close friends of PTI. Most of us are either licensed or pre-licensed social workers or marriage and family therapists, with a sprinkling of Ph.D.'s. I should very much like to include other people with professional experience in the field of psychotherapy and if you are reading this, I'd probably like to hear from you.

Opinions, interventions (useful and not), no-shame screw-ups, "how I learned what I learned," personal stories illustrating technique or theory, musings, general observations, etc. will all be welcomed and considered.

To communicate about participating, contact me at [interact@processes.org](mailto:interact@processes.org)

*Carol Nichols Hadlock*

## Integrative ideas for the process-oriented psychotherapist

**Q.** I haven't a clue what to work on with this person. There is so much that I have no idea where to begin.

**A.** Sometimes your psyche tells you, "Stop working so hard. Let the other person do the work." In this case, capitalize on the fact that you haven't a clue. Figure out a way to invite the other guy to begin.

Here's an idea. Memorize these words:  
*"Show me."*

Have available in the room items such as paper, crayons, and markers. A small tray with a little sand in it plus a few rocks, shells, or small plastic doodads would be helpful. Keep in mind the room's furniture, pillow cushions, etc. can also be used in numerous ways. These and other items can represent pretty much anything you or the client can think of.

If, when you say, "Show me," the person professes not to understand what you are talking about, draw a couple of figures on a paper, put a couple of shells or rocks on the rug, or move a couple of chairs around, and say something like,

*"If this circle/rock/chair represents you, and this doodle/shell/pillow represents (the other person), does the fact that they're overlapping represent the relationship between the two of you? Or perhaps this is it . . . you present another configuration). Oh, neither is correct? Okay. Show me. What is correct?"*

Be a curious but slow learner. Take your time understanding.

♪

**Q.** She parries every invitation.

**A.** Your job is to make invitations; her job is to parry them. Let go of expectations each time you invite something. Notice and work with her response to your invitation. Stay separate and do not take any of her parries personally.

**Part of what she does is to blame me. She'll say, "If you hadn't said that, I would've been able to stay in my feelings."**

Consider joining her. Acknowledge either the underlying positive intent or any part of what she says with which you can agree.

*"Possibly so."*

*"Considering (your circumstances), I can see how you might come to that conclusion."*

Then put the attention back on her.

*"Tell me what you would have liked me to do instead."*

You are not responsible for whether another human being stays "in her feelings." Just think. If you were, you could direct everyone to connect with their grief whenever they moved out of their joy and world peace would be attained in a year.

Work with the process you notice, which, in this case, is blaming.

As with any intervention, you have the choice of inviting her to work cognitively, introspectively, or within a relationship with Self or Other. Should you elect to invite the work to be within a relationship, you can invite the work to take place in the here-and-now or in the there-and-then.

Here are some ideas, depending on what you prefer.

In relationship with Other, there and then:

*"My guess is you blame other people a lot. Is that true? Who taught you to do that?"*

*"How old were you when you first learned that blaming was useful as a protective device?"*

In relationship with Other, here and now:

*"My guess is you're blaming me. Is that true? Tell me what it is I'm doing that you don't like?"*

*"Imagine your mother is in this chair. Tell her what it was like to be blamed. Tell her how angry that makes you."*

In relationship with Self, there and then:

*"My guess is you blame other people a lot. Is that true? How does that benefit you?"*

*"How else do you usually keep yourself from connecting with your feelings?"*

In relationship with Self, here and now.

*"How do you experience that in your body?"*

*Breathe into your feeling. What's coming up for you right now?"*

♪

**Q.** This man is like a gnat, all over the place.

**A.** And you are bugged, right?

**Yeah, I guess I am. For example, he'll say, "I want to find out why I'm so impatient . . .," and then he'll change the subject.**

Interrupt him and invite him to do again, the thing he is doing. Invite him to pay attention while he does it even more.

You: Say again that you want to find out why you're so impatient. And then change the subject.

Him: (gets a little confused, but does it.)

You: Good. Now say it again, and this time, before you change the subject, say out loud, "I'm gonna to change the subject, now." And *then* change the subject.

The goal here isn't to get him to change, it is to invite him to become more mindful, more aware, more conscious of himself.

Promote a dialogue between his impatience and the rest of him.

*"Here is your impatience (pointing to a small pillow or empty chair), ask it what it wants from you."*

*"Here's your impatience. (You hold out an object, he does not take it). I notice you hesitate to touch it. What's that about?"*

Take responsibility for how you use his activity to bug yourself. Detach yourself from needing him to be different.

Find ways to work with his stated process which is, "I want to find out," or work with his distracting behavior, which is the process, "Watch me *not* find out."

When he says he wants to find something out, ask him how he will be sabotaging that today.

*"If you Didn't want to find that out, how might you go about not-finding it out? Show me. Do it now."*

At the beginning of every session, either ask him what he wants for himself that day or notice the very first subject he brings up. Then keep bringing the focus back to that subject. In the example you have given, no matter what subject he changes to, wonder out loud how the new topic is related to his impatience. Wonder what his response to all your wonderings has to do with impatience.

As he changes the subject, interrupt him and ask what he notices about himself, "right now."

Towards the end of every session, ask if he got what he wanted and if not, what was his part in not getting it.

Roleplay impatience. Work with his reaction.

Any time he starts flitting around (isn't that what gnats do, flit?), watch him for a moment and say,

*"Say what it is you fear, right this moment."*

*"On a scale from zero to 10, how afraid are you right now?"*

If the answer to the above question is anything but zero, invite him to explore his fear.

**He may just change the subject again.**

That's okay. Eventually, when he discovers it's okay with you that he doesn't answer, he may feel safe enough to introspect and share his findings.

Ask him to draw with markers or mess around with the sandtray while he is talking and flitting from subject to subject. His hands may be able to tell you what mouth cannot.

**Q. Sometimes I can't think of anything to do in session and I feel helpless.**

**A.** When you don't know what to do in session, choose one of two things:

- Invite him to be here with you.
- Invite him to be here with himself.

Whatever the client is talking about, invite that thing, incident, person, experience, metaphor, or relationship into the session, here and now.

Holding to the idea that you have to do something puts pressure on yourself and, ironically, sets up expectations that stifle creativity. When you feel helpless in session, and the client notices your distress, *he* may feel pressured to do something. When that happens, he is paying more attention to *your* process than to his own. You have become more attractive to him than his neurosis.

Find out what happens when you give yourself permission not to "do"

## Survival of the Fittest



Down at the tribal water hole one morning, a certain distracted caveman and his beloved grandmother were surprised by a saber-toothed tiger looking for his breakfast. The grandmother became a delicious first course and the caveman was confronted by the need to make a quick decision about what action he should take next. Now if the caveman had accessed his grief in those first few moments, it is possible he would have been too overcome to keep his body out of harm's way. He too, might have become part of the tiger's breakfast. Alternatively, if he had accessed his anger immediately, he might have attacked the still hungry tiger all by himself. This would have been a brave but probably foolhardy thing to do. Instead, he wisely accessed his fear and used the

attendant adrenalin to rapidly remove his body toward the protection of his cave. Once safely there, his fear could give way to anger. Sensible as always, he used the anger's energy to round up the members of his tribe. Their first response was to be afraid, too. Later, after much dancing and many rituals, tribe members who were able to replace their fear with anger or excitement accompanied the caveman back toward tiger territory. They were eager to exact revenge and to celebrate their hunting skills. Later still, after slaying the tiger, everyone experienced much relief, joy, and satisfaction, for in those days, roasted tiger meat was quite a treat.

This caveman was lucky. He lived in a emotionally healthy tribe. He had not taken the tiger on all by himself, but they neither judged nor shamed him. If they had, he probably would

by Carol Hadlock

have felt guilt, or spent a great deal of time defending himself. Instead, he was encouraged to take responsibility for not having been watchful enough, to experience his sadness that imperfection was apparently part of his character, and to use the pain of his sadness to make an agreement with his inner self, not to make that same mistake again. At appropriate moments in the ensuing months, the caveman allowed himself to experience his great grief over his grandmother's death. And because he was not afraid of his sadness, he let himself grieve until his grief was done. So done, in fact, that in later times when he reflected on his grandmother, all he felt was the warm emotion of love and an accompanying appreciation that he had had the privilege of knowing her.



anything in session. Quiet your mind. Wait for an idea, a thought, a picture, a memory, . . . Breathe.

When you can't think of anything to do in session, try trusting yourself completely and don't do anything! Doing nothing is often the perfect thing to do. It holds a space for the client to act, think, or speak as they please, and without interference.

Once your brain gets the idea about focusing on process and staying out of the system, your own organism is the best therapeutic tool you have. Pay attention to it, use it, and have as one of your personal goals to begin to let go of the dreaded Supposed To's.

When you can't think in session, it often helps to get out of your chair. So stand up and say some version of, "I have an idea. Let's . . ." It doesn't matter what your idea is. Work with his response to your idea.

Usually, whatever is going on with you has something to do with whatever is going on with the client, even though you might not know what, exactly. In this case, use your internal response as an intervention. Incorporate "can't think" or "feel helpless" into the work.

Name what is going on with you. Then direct the focus back onto him. Invite him to explore his response to your helplessness.

*"I'm feeling helpless right now. I wonder if you feel helpless right now, too?"*

*"Who else gets helpless when you expect them to do something?"*

*"How do you get helpless when you can't think of anything to do?"*

**Easy to say, hard to do. I feel shame when I don't know what to do. It's hard admitting I'm less than perfect.**

I have the same neurosis. Shame is one way we beat up on ourselves when we do not do our Shoulds.

In your personal psychotherapy, invite yourself to move in the direction of self-acceptance. While you are working on that, try making use of the emotion of anger as a biochemical antidote to shame.

Experiment with this in your own body. Find a way to get ticked off that your helplessness is interfering with your professional competence. The shame may hang around on the edges but while you are mad, the annoyance takes precedence and your mind will be clearer.

If you can hold onto that annoyance while you make a sentence, use your emotional response as an intervention.

*"I hate to admit being less than perfect. Is that true for you too? What I'm doing to counteract my embarrassment is allowing myself to be annoyed that I feel helpless. The emotion of annoyance seems to neutralize shame."*

**Whatever a person wants from someone else is usually what she needs to get from herself.**

Then put the attention back on the other person. This makes an intervention out of your response.

*"Try it yourself. Find something to be annoyed at right now."*

**So that's what to do when I don't know what to do. What about when the *client* doesn't know the right thing to do?**

Let's see, an experiential enactment which dramatizes the process of not-knowing-what-to-do. Hmmm . . . So, how do *you* usually decide what to do when you don't know what to do?

**(shrugs) I dunno.**

Here are two pieces of tissue. One is the right one to pick and the other is the wrong one. Pick one now.

**(Picks one.)**

So how did you decide to pick that one?

**I don't know.**

Okay. So let's do it again. This time, pay attention to what's going on with you as you make the decision. Here are two pencils. Pick the right one, now.

**(Hesitates.)**

Wait a minute. Are you feeling helpless?

**Yes!**

Okay. Notice that. Now, pick. And keep paying attention to your internal responses.

**(Picks one.)**

What happened?

**Oh, I don't know. I didn't know which one to pick so I just picked any old one.**

Are you feeling helpless now?

**No. But I still don't know if what I picked was the right thing to pick.**

Well, there you have it. When you don't know what to do, not-doing something leads to helplessness. And just doing any old thing doesn't clear up your not-knowing, but it does eliminate the helplessness.

**Well, I still don't know if it was the right thing to do.**

That's true. So this time, you tell *me* to pick the right one.

**Here are two pieces of paper. Pick the right one.**

(I take a few seconds to introspect. Then I stand up, walk over to the white board and start to draw a picture while humming to myself.)

**Hey. You didn't pick the right one.**

Yes I did. I checked inside myself to find out what the right thing to pick was. It turned out to be enjoying myself while I drew this picture.

**Q. She wants me to help her break through her denial. What exactly is denial?**

**A.** Denial is a refusal to admit or recognize an occurrence or possibility. I don't know about you, but denial is the preferred state for many of us (not me, of course) when we don't want to deal with reality, our terror, or the possibility of change. To create an enactment, think reflexively. Whatever a person wants from someone else is usually what she needs to get from herself. Focus on process as opposed to content. If you are uncertain which process to attend to, trying thinking to yourself how you would answer the question, *What is happening?*

For example, there are two predicates in your description above. Pared down to essentials, they are "break through denial" and "wants me to help." With the help of action phrases such as break-through and wants-me-to, you can, with little or no experience, set up enactments that mirror a client's process quite elegantly.

Make pictures in your head of someone breaking through something or of someone wanting someone else to help. Share your picture as an invitation for an imagery.

Hold out a piece of paper. Ask her to break through it. If she does, ask her what the difference is between breaking through the paper and breaking through denial.

Set up a couple of chairs in front of her to represent denial. Ask her to break through.

**She'll say she needs to get a different perspective.**

Suggest she move somewhere in the room to get a different perspective. If, in fooling around with the perspective, she somehow finds herself on the other side of the chairs, ask her to articulate in detail how she got there: "I stood up, and got so busy looking for a different perspective that I moved around the denial."

Invite her to position herself in a way that mimes "want-you-to-help." For example, she might get down on her knees, arms

outstretched pleadingly, or palms together as if praying. Hold a container of “answers” just out of reach. Direct her to stay there and introspect as her body sends her pain, messages, or memories.

#### **She diagnoses herself as in denial.**

On a whiteboard or large piece of paper, invite her to write the words “I deny that:” followed by a list of all the things she denies. The “I deny that” at the top of the list makes every phrase she writes an easy topic to use in polarity work. For example, suppose she writes, “I am happy.” When she reads the whole sentence, it will say, “I deny that I am happy.”

As an example, should she say, “I deny that I am happy,” immediately invite her to put the part of her who’s happy in one chair and the part of her who denies she is happy in the other. Direct them to dialogue with each other.

#### **She wants me to give her the answers.**

So, give her some answers. Give her good answers; give her bad answers. Give her silly answers. Invite her to pay attention to her reactions each time.

Direct her to draw a picture of herself, the denial, you, and the answers.

Work with each detail of the picture.

Wonder especially, what part of her, the “you” in the picture represents.

Invite her to work with “wanting someone to help me break through something” in imagery. Wonder what that looks like. Wonder what happens next.

Tell her to say the words, “I want you to help me break through my denial,” several times and then without conscious thought or censoring, create a sand tray, dance, drawing or sculpt.

Ask her who else she wanted to help her, but they never did.

Suggest she perceive her denial as a gift from her subconscious. Invite her to respect her need to deny by defining “denial” as a way to protect oneself.

Wonder what else she denies herself.

Wonder *how* else she denies herself.

Wonder who it was in her childhood who denied her, originally.

Wonder what else she is “in,” besides denial.

The psyche seems to love wordplay. Invite her to have an imagery where she is living in Egypt and swimming in its longest river.

#### **Q. How do you respond to a client’s general questionings?**

**A.** Anyway you want to: be serious, get creative, lie, tell the truth. Keep putting the attention back on the person and work with the responses.

Answer simply and directly, truthfully or untruthfully; then put the attention back on the client.

*(Give your answer, then pause), “What’s your response to that?”*

## Starbucks Therapy

by Janelle Schmidt

**In order to expedite my MFT intern hours, I’ve chosen to work as a Social Worker for an agency that offers a program to families who have children with autism. In my role, I provide a space for the parents to work through the many issues of raising a developmentally delayed child. I meet with parents in many different places, including their homes, coffee shops, and restaurants. When I first started this work, I felt intimidated being in these environments and just settled for ‘talk therapy.’ I wasn’t able to give myself**



**permission to ‘go outside the box’ and integrate what I’d learned in my training program. And then, the day came when it all changed!**



**I was meeting a mother at Starbucks. I’ll call her Jane. As Jane was describing her dilemma, I felt an urge to create a family sculpture...but how to do this?**

**Obviously, I couldn’t use the other customers sitting around us and also I had to respect Jane’s confidentiality. So, I grabbed the paper cups that held our lattes, the lids, and our cell phones. Using these objects, I started to build a sculpture representing Jane’s family as she talked. When Jane got curious about what I was doing, I said, “This is how I see your family. Is this how you see your family?” Jane immediately started moving the various objects around. She put the cup which represented her, in the center. She put cell phones representing certain family members on top of “her” cup, and cups and lids representing other family members right next to her cup. When she was done, she said, (I see that) “I’m exhausted because I’m in the center and holding the whole thing up.”**

**Since then, I’ve integrated metaphors and story telling into my meetings with parents as well as the use of three dimensional sculptures. It never ceases to amaze me how often the parents accept these invitations to explore their issues. By getting out of my own way, I’ve been honored to witness parents working through issues no parent ever wants to face, like having to place their child in a group home. Because I’ve enriched my work as a Social Worker, I feel that the parents are also able to deepen their processes. The bottom line is that I appreciate and enjoy my work much more now that I am integrating some of the techniques usually used in slightly deeper work into my approach with parents.**

Respond to the process.

*“What do you want from me right now?”*

*“What do you need right now?”*

*“What is your concern?”*

Deflect the question.

*“I have total trust that you already know the answer. Ask that question again, out loud. This time pay attention to your internal experiences both as you speak and immediately afterward.”*

*“Name some of your other questions.”*

#### **What if they ask you a direct question?**

Answer it, then put the attention back on them.

*“Yes, I do. How is that for you?”*

*“No, I don’t. How is that for you?”*

*“Actually, I don’t know. What happens when you hear that?”*

Do not answer it, then put the attention back on them.

*“What do You think about that?”*

*“I’m not certain. Let’s see if we can find a way to find out.” (Then make use of art supplies, sand tray, found objects in the room, furniture,*

*metaphors, etc. to tease out a possible answer.)*

*“What would the perfect answer be?”*

*“I’m not going to answer that. Describe what it is like for you when I don’t do what you want.”* ♪

**Q. Three different times last week I found myself disconnected from my work. Essentially, I wasn’t really in the room.**

**A.** I’m glad you are aware of that. Were you aware in the session or did you figure it out afterward?

#### **Afterward.**

Perhaps:

- You thought you had to fix somebody.
- You thought you had to do a perfect job.
- You were scared.
- You wanted to be someplace else.
- You were angry.
- Your body was trying to tell you, “I need to get out of the room.”
- Your body was trying to tell you, “I need to get out of the system.”

As you become more experienced, you will probably find it easier and easier to recognize and name (at least to yourself) your process in session while it’s happening. Sometimes the most effective therapeutic interventions are the ones that come from our countertransferences.

Find out for yourself. As an experiment, see if you can find a way to use your own process at least once in every session you do. If you can’t think of anything else, you might try something like,

*“I notice I’m thinking, feeling, responding, making up a story, remembering, seeing, reminded of . . . (whatever), right now. What’s your response to that?” How does that relate to what you’re talking about?”*

Make a broad guess that whatever is going on for you is also going on for the client. You can use yourself as a starting point, (see above) or you might just go for the big time.

*“On a scale from zero to ten, how disconnected from yourself are you, right now? . . . Okay. How did you find the answer to that question?”*

*“Where do you go, when your body is sitting in that chair and you are not in the room?”*

*“Say that again and this time, find out what you have to do in order to stay in the room as you talk.”* ♪

## The Tao Of Soooooo.....?

by Susan Aiken

This dialogue is actually a synthesis of many conversations I have had with parents over the years. It’s about how parents believe that they must do any number of things to make sure their child does school work, continues playing soccer, practices the piano, always says “thank you,” dates the right person, cleans their room, eats their vegetables, takes a shower, talks to their teacher, stops “sagging” his pants, doesn’t wear that tight T-shirt, . . .

As parents we have such good intentions. We want the best for our children. That is almost universally true. And so, we wage war. We become controlling, manipulative, praise-happy, whiny, angry, guilt-provoking people. Who would have “thunk” it? I think what drives us to this madness is a free-floating anxiety that our “darlings” won’t , , , . . . Won’t what? That’s what leads me to share this little therapeutic intervention with you. Hopefully you will enjoy it. Laugh about it and maybe even lighten up a bit. In the end, I usually remind parents, “If you’re the average parent, you are doing a “good-enough” job and your kid is going to turn out just fine.”

Parents: “We just don’t know what to do about John’s homework. He’s gotten a warning that right now he’s got a “D” in math and P.E. For pete’s sake, P.E. Who gets a D in P.E? His teacher says he forgets his P.E. clothes and doesn’t suit up. And math. Geez, we got him a tutor. But he still isn’t turning in his homework. The teacher says he does great on it when he turns it in. I just don’t get it. Doesn’t he care about his grades. What can we do?”

Therapist: Well, what have you tried so far?

Parents: We’ve threatened him with no phone. We’ve told him he’s grounded until he brings his D’s up to C’s. We even threatened to take away his computer so he can’t waste time IMing his friends or talking with whoever on “My Space.”

Therapist: And what’s happened?

Parents: Nothing! He seems to try a little harder for awhile and then it goes back to the way it was. We thought things were fine until we got another warning notice from the school.

Therapist: What do you think is going on with him?

Parents: I really don’t know. He seems happy enough. He doesn’t talk to us very much about things. But that started a few years ago. We thought that was pretty normal for his age. Now we are wondering if something has happened that we don’t know about.

Therapist: Like what?

Parents: Maybe, he’s doing things he shouldn’t be doing.

Therapist: Like what?

Parents: Maybe someone has hurt him, you know violated him. Or maybe he’s smoking pot. He’s been hanging out a lot with kids we don’t know very well.

Therapist: Have things changed for him lately? Is he losing weight, or acting stoned, or having trouble sleeping at night?

Parents: No, not really

Therapist: Have you seen any change in his appetite or appearance lately?

Parents: No. I wish he’d keep his room cleaner, . . . but lot’s of parents we know complain about the same thing.

Therapist: Okay, soooooo . . . ? What’s your fear about him getting two D’s?

Parents: Well, if he gets D’s on his report card he’ll have to take the classes over in the summer.

Therapist: Soooooo . . . ?

Parents: We don’t think he’s going to want to spend his summer in summer school.

Therapist: Soooooo . . . ?

Parents: Well, then he’s going to make our lives miserable.

Therapist: How would he do that?

Parents: He’d be cranky and unpleasant.

Therapist: Soooooo . . . ?

Parents: Well we shouldn’t have to pay the price for his D’s.

Therapist: Okay, then don’t.

Parents: What do you expect us to do? Just ignore him?

Therapist: That sounds good.

Parents: That would be impossible.

Therapist: Why?

Parents: Because he has a way of letting us know when he’s mad at us.

Therapist: What does that look like?

**If, when the train is coming, you won’t get off the tracks**

**out of love for yourself,**

**consider stepping to safety**

**out of love for the train.**



Parents: He storms around and tells us to leave him alone.

Therapist: Soooooo. . . ?

Parents: We don't want to allow him to treat us that way.

Therapist: Okay, so what do you do when he does?

Parents: We send him to his room and tell him he needs to stop talking to us that way.

Therapist: Does that work?

Parents: Not really. But we just can't let him get away with that behavior.

Therapist: Why not?

Parents: Because we wouldn't be raising him right. We wouldn't be doing our job as parents.

Therapist: So what *is* your job as parents?

Parents: To make sure that he does well so he can live a happy life.

Therapist: What does that look like?

Parents: Well, if he wants to be a doctor he can go to medical school because he has the grades. Whatever he decides to be or do he gets the opportunity because we made sure he did the right things along the way. Doing homework, staying away from drugs, things like that. It also means that he will be able to make a good living and support a family.

Therapist: So according to this stance he will be happy if he gets good grades, stays on the straight and narrow, and succeeds in going to college. That will lead to everything else, like being able to support a family and have enough money. Is that right?

Parents: Yeah! Well, we also want him to be a Good Person. That's an important part of being happy and well-balanced.

Therapist: What does being a good person mean?

Parents: That he knows right from wrong, that he's kind and sensitive, that he cares about people and the world. That he makes a contribution to the world - even if that only means being a good father. That he is the kind of man that people want to know. That he's dependable and honest. There are probably other things, but that's what comes to mind right now.

Therapist: And you see all that connected to getting better grades than he is right now?

Parents: Yes.

Therapist: Let me ask you this. Can he be a successful, good, and happy person without getting good grades.?

Parents: Well, I guess so. But it seems to us that the kids who turn out well get good grades and go to college and that kids who

don't, end up doing construction work and struggling to make a living and getting into trouble along the way.

Therapist: Soooooo. . . ?

Parents: We don't want that to happen to our son.

Therapist: What if I said that getting a D in P.E. and math is the perfect thing for him right now.

Parents: We wouldn't believe you.

Therapist: Why not?

Parents: Because he's capable of much better than that.

**Trust that his mistakes are as important to his becoming successful as his triumphs.**

Therapist: Soooooo. . . ?

Parents: If we don't stay on top of this now school could become a real problem.

Therapist: For whom?

Parents: For him. And for us. We want to get it right. We don't want him to fail. We don't want him to think he's only a D student. He isn't. He's being lazy and irresponsible and he needs us to help him get past being lazy and start taking responsibility for his grades!

Therapist: Yes. And this is about where we started. Here's my input: Sometimes getting bad grades is a good thing. Most kids want to do well in school and will find a way to self-correct. However, parents often feel they have to make sure their kid feels as bad as he should about it. So they lay it on good and thick. They lecture, threaten, plead and try to control the kid. They actually end up giving the kid something besides his grades to be upset about. It's like they provide the distraction so the kid gets to be in a power struggle with them instead of himself. He can focus on his anger at his parents instead of the discomfort he feels about not doing well. In an effort to make the kid take responsibility, these parents actually rob him of the opportunity to take responsibility. The parents are acting as if the bad grades were theirs, not his.

Parents: Are you saying we should do nothing about his D's?

Therapist: That's one possibility.

Parents: But what if that doesn't work?

Therapist: What do you mean "not work?"

Parents: What if he continues to get bad grades. Then what?

Therapist: Then you are at another fork in the road. But that's the future not the present. Have you considered asking him how he

feels about the warnings and the possibility of getting two D's?

Parents: Sure, but all he say's is that the P.E. teacher's stupid and that he's taking care of math.

Therapist: Good!

Parents: Gooooo?! That sounds like a bunch of B.S. to us.

Therapist: It might be. Soooooo. . . ?

Parents: Then he will have gotten away with something.

Therapist: Sooooo?

Parents: Then he'll think that he can do what ever he wants and we won't do anything about it.

Therapist: Is that true? You won't do anything about anything?

Parents: No.

Therapist: Good! There are some things you do have to be involved with. Most of these have to do with safety and health like: taking him to the dentist, setting reasonable curfews, feeding him good food, making sure he knows about the birds and the bees. But, the most important thing you can do for him as he goes through these transitional years is support him emotionally. Don't assume the worst about him. Trust in his basic human nature and core goodness. And trust that his mistakes are as important to his becoming successful as his triumphs.

Parents: Well, we don't expect him to be perfect. But what do you mean his mistakes are important?

Therapist: What I mean is that when we make a mistake it doesn't feel good. By its very nature a mistake has undesirable consequences attached to it. And, therefore it teaches or at least gives us a choice about what to do next time. When the consequence is parents getting mad and punishing the kid, then the kid is going to learn how to avoid upsetting his parents. Or the kid does battle with them. In either case the real consequence fades into the back ground and the learning experience is gone.

Parents: Yes, but it's hard not to get concerned.

Therapist: Of course. And Sooooo? That's really your problem. You are parents going through you own hard time, seeing your little boy turning into a young man, not trusting that he is ready to be "launched." Kids in these years often make their parents really uncomfortable. They start closing their doors, talking or IMing friends constantly, pushing for more freedom, being secretive and sneaky, and sometimes doing



things that lead parents to believe that they're starting to lose control and their kid is going to be one of those "bad teenagers." It's scary, and worrisome, and aggravating. Just as scary and worrisome to me, as a therapist, are the "perfect" kids. They buy into the notion that their worth is tied to their achievements and behavior. So they conform at home and at school and often go on conforming in life for many years. They may be perfectly nice people and seem perfectly happy. But many of them end up in my office wondering about their lives and themselves: who they really are, what truly makes them happy, what happens if they're not perfect, . . . Kids rebelling against parents makes parents miserable. But rebelling helps kids become "individuated." Taking risks, failing and making mistakes is an incredibly important part of the process.

Parents: Are you saying that all of the kids we know who are doing well aren't going to be happy?

Therapist: No, not at all. There are many factors and variables in every family. These years are big transitions for kids and also for parents. Kids are learning to be out in the world without their parents and parents are learning how to let go and let them be out there not knowing all the details. Some families are temperamentally less reactive. That alone makes the teen years much easier. But let's come back to you. Let's imagine for a moment that you said to Johnny, "Gosh, son. Looks like you are struggling with P.E. and Math. Are you okay? Would you like us to help you with the math?" Let's say he answers, NO. It's all good. The P.E. teacher is a stupid jerk and I've got the math covered." What if you then said, "Okay. Sorry to hear about the P.E. teacher. I'm sure you'll figure out the best way to handle that. And we're glad to hear you've got the math handled."

Parents: Right! I can't imagine having a conversation like that. And what if we did and then he ended up keeping those D's on his report card.

Therapist: What if he did?

Parents: Then he'd be doing something wrong, something that could jeopardize his future, limit his possible choices . . . It's hard getting into a good college.

Therapist: Soooooo. . . ? Maybe he'll go to a Junior college first, or maybe he'll start college when he's older. Maybe he'll have good enough grades to go to a state college. Or maybe he'll get excellent grades, get into Yale and absolutely hate it. That exact thing happened to someone I know. You obviously think college should be

important to him. Is that true?

Parents: Absolutely.

Therapist: What if it isn't?

Parents: Then we don't know what kind of chance he has of being successful in life.

Therapist: Soooooo. . . ? It's his choice to make.

He has to want it himself. What if he doesn't want it right now and so he doesn't care about school that much. What if he'd be happier in the trades. I know someone who worked throughout college doing plumbing. He graduated as an engineer, got a job and almost immediately quit. He hated sitting in an office all day. He opened a plumbing business and was happy as a clam and made lots of money!

Parents: We just don't want him to do something now he'll regret later.

Therapist: Soooooo. . . ? He should not feel regret?

Parents: We would hate to see that happen to him.

Therapist: Of course. Being a parent has a lot of risk involved. We may want for them what they don't want for themselves. Then what? Do we keep nagging and pushing them to do what we believe is right for them? Many parents do, and end up with a very conflictual relationship with their kids, or end up with young adults who have no idea what they want to do because they don't know themselves. There are lots of variations of these two possibilities. But the ideal thing would be for a kid to make mistakes, regret them and then change the outcome the next time.

Parents: Yeah, but in the meantime he could be losing a lot of ground and making things so hard for himself. And if he doesn't go to college now he may never get the chance.

Therapist: Soooooo. . . ? Does that mean you haven't done a good job as parents or that he isn't a good son?

Parents: Maybe.

Therapist: Or *Not*. Why are you so afraid for this kid?

Parents: Life is tough. We want him to succeed.

Therapist: Then let him. Right now he's succeeding at getting two D's. He will either feel bad about this or not. But if you let him have his own experience about this he'll be much more likely to learn something about what he wants. Is this making any sense to you?

Parents: Yes. It is. But it is a huge change in thinking for us.

Therapist: Soooooo. . . ? Parents have to grow up too.



***Three Perspectives for helping clients find more ease in their lives***

by Don Hadlock

<p><b>When clients perceive events and actions in ways that do not feel good to them, an invitation to change their thinking can facilitate movement toward an experience of well-being. Clients often spend much of their sessions focused on others instead of themselves. They get lost in trying to understand why someone else thinks and behaves in such unbelievable ways. When this happens one thing I do is offer one of the following three perspectives as an invitation for them to let go of needing to understand the "reasons" for somebody else's behavior. "Let's experiment," I suggest, "to see if you feel any better when you view others through one of the following perceptions."</b></p>	<p><b>EACH OF US IS DOING THE BEST WE KNOW HOW TO DO AT THE TIME.</b></p> <p><b>When we are acting from a lost, unconscious, or unaware place, we believe that our every action is moving us closer to ease, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Even when it does not work, we keep up our behavior until we become aware of the pain we cause ourselves, acquire new guidance, or raise our consciousness.</b></p>	<p><b>WE ARE ONE</b></p> <p><b>We are all essentially on the same journey, dancing and stumbling along, and interacting with one another. We are all parts of the interconnectedness of life. We manifest our reality together, not separately, from one another. We are happiest when we hold a state of grace and compassion for what we all are experiencing and creating.</b></p> <p><b>Often one of these perspective can help a client release the energy tied up in blaming and trying to understand others and, at the same time, to experience more ease in the world.</b></p>
<p><b>EVERYONE IS ON THEIR OWN JOURNEY</b></p> <p><b>We can never understand another person's journey, let alone judge it. We can, however, choose how we want to relate to another person as our journeys cross.</b></p>		

## Working With Families

Usually when a family enters counseling, family members are externally focused. That means they are primarily aware of what other people are doing wrong. Mostly, they just want some other person to be fixed.

In general, they have poor communication skills and little experience with intimacy. Most are embarrassed to be in the office at all and are secretly concerned that their defenses and low self-esteem will be unmasked. Additionally, most people are oriented to the past or to the future, and are not actually in their bodies.

So begin, not necessarily in this order, to:

- **Intervene Without Attachment To Outcome**

Be, say, do, ask, act, or react without agenda. Notice many of their processes. Choose one. Find a way to enact it so they might encounter themselves in your session. Afterwards, work with however they respond to your interventions.

- **Call Attention To Process**

Attend to how they are and what they are doing relative to each other. Invite awareness of their underlying interactions, experiences, rhythms, ways of relating, and patterns of communication.

- **Encourage Clear And Direct Communication**

Model and teach effective communication skills. Tell the truth about yourself. Own, as guesses, your perceptions of other people. Make all your invitations without expectations or attachment to outcome. Encourage I-statements: "These are my concerns. These are my limits. This is my response right now."

Invite family members to listen for understanding, introspect, and tell the truth about themselves rather than tell the truth about the other guy.

- **Invite People Into The Present**

Encourage them to talk about, notice, acknowledge, connect with, experience, and allow that which is happening right here, right now. Invite them into the here-now even as

they talk about what happened a week ago, three minutes ago or what might be happening tomorrow.

- **Invite The Taking Of Responsibility**

Encourage introspection and direct language structures to invite the taking of responsibility for one's own experiences and behaviors. "In this moment, I am experiencing this."

- **Invite Attention Onto Intentions**

Invite the focus onto the long term goal of having a good relationship rather than the short term goal of winning-in-the-moment. Encourage each person to attend to what it is they Really Hope For, right now, right here in this session.

- **Encourage The Letting Go Of Attachments**

Teach the difference between "wanting" and "needing." Encourage each to have preferences and goals without needing them to happen. Define "intention" as moving in a direction that celebrates who you are. Define "investment" as being dependent on an external Other for the quality of your life.

- **Encourage Tolerance Of Differences.**

Parents, no matter what they say, have a really tough time letting go of the illusion that their children are extensions of themselves. Invite parents to individuate from their children. Invite older children not to take it personally that their parents are so weird. Remind them that one of the tasks of growing up is accepting your parents for what they are and letting go of the hope they will change. Teach everyone that a mark of maturity is moving past the belief that other people ought to be a certain way before they are approvable.

- **Invite Intimacy**

Intimacy is acknowledging Self and sharing one's truth with Other in the moment. "I am here-now doing this With You." Encourage each member of the family to share his individual experience as the family's process unfolds. Since intimacy requires some connection with Self, as the desire for intimacy increases, the need often arises to complete individual issues. So,...

- **Be Available For Individual Work**

Acknowledgment and acceptance of Self clarifies personal boundaries and leads to the acceptance of differences in others. Work with one person while the others witness, use the family as props or schedule individual time. And as individual issues are resolved,...

- **Bring The Work Back Into The System**

Through enactments and roleplays, use the family as a supportive group where individuals can practice respect, tolerance, and individuation. With luck, they will cease clinging to each other from a position of dependency, need, and fear, and begin to be with each other (or not) from a position of choice.

### INTERACT Issue number 1, April 2007

Editor: Carol Nichols Hadlock; Contributing Editor: Don Hadlock. Integrative Ideas...Q&A's, Survival of the Fittest, Working with Families, and the train saying are updated excerpts from Psychotherapy in Process:Supervision Dialogues, ©1993 by Carol L Hadlock, LMFT, and are reprinted here by permission, 2007. Each of the following articles is printed by permission, 2007. All other rights and copyrights are reserved by the author: The Tao of Sooooo . . . by Susan Aiken, LMFT; Starbucks Therapy by Janelle Schmidt, LMFT; and Three Perspectives by Don Hadlock, LMFT. Clip Art is from office.microsoft.com

We cannot be held responsible for any unsolicited submissions we receive. We do not open unsolicited attachments delivered to us by email.

Contact us at 408-358-2218 x 443 or [interact@processes.org](mailto:interact@processes.org).

For back issues and/or subscription information go to: <http://www.processes.org/interact.php>

Process Therapy Institute is a psychotherapy training center in Los Gatos, California. To find out more, go to <http://www.processes.org>