

Back to Basics:

Being Curious, Respectful, and Tentative

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“Basics” are not “essentials”; that is, many readers may see my list as incomplete. To borrow an old phrase from research, I see my list of “basics” as necessary, but they may not be sufficient for some who practice solution-focused therapy. But I hope I add to the conversation and bridge theoretical gaps for some. In the last issue of *RATKES*, I spoke of four basic attitudes that I find crucial in maintaining a solution-focused stance. Having covered non-pathologizing, I would like to continue with the other three in this column: curiosity, respect, and being tentative.

About Curiosity: I was visiting a counseling practicum student at her site this week, as most students like to experience a counseling session in which both the student counselor and I meet with a client and learn together. As the counselor and I were meeting with a ten-year-old African American boy who has few material resources and a fairly unstable home life, we began asking questions about how he has made positive strides in controlling his classroom “manners” (not blurting out answers, raising his hand if he wishes to speak, only talking during appropriate times, and so on). We were pretty relentless in our curiosity; and exceptions just kept rolling off his tongue! We were all amazed by the seemingly endless list of behaviors and thoughts this child connected to his positive change, and I was openly impressed by the student counselor’s genuine curiosity that took the question “What else?” to new levels.

Curiosity requires one to be what I call slow-to-know. I assume there is always another “right” answer; I believe I can be surprised by every response from a client; and I push myself to listen for the not-yet-said so I always have another question to ask. The difference between an interrogation and a counseling session is often in the tone of one’s questions, and the curious stance of the solution-focused practitioner always follows the client’s last response rather than anticipating responses or working from a list of questions.

About Being Tentative: A client recovering from years of what she called self-abuse (alcoholism, purging, and compulsive exercise, among other things) returned to therapy because she was experiencing cutting behavior for the first time in her life. She had read various websites on cutting, but nearly all of them talked about causes more than solutions or change. When I asked her what she thought brought on this puzzling behavior, she said “my lawyer.” I am certain I looked surprised! (I am married to a lawyer, by the way!) When I explored her understanding of this connection between her cutting behavior and her lawyer, she related her experiences of frustration with her divorce lawyer. The lawyer was trying to kindly mediate with the client’s husband and his lawyer rather than “acting like my lawyer.” My client said that she wanted her lawyer to be her advocate and “go after” the other party to get her what she justly deserved in the pending divorce, though she had not voiced this opinion with her lawyer. Our discussion centered on times she had made her wishes known and been successful in speaking her mind. At the end of our session, she said she knew what she had to do and was prepared to “tell off” her lawyer during their next meeting. I received a telephone call later that week, and my client said, “I told her off – I used obscenities I have never used before! – and I know things are going to go my way now.” My client stopped cutting on herself after the next court appearance (within two weeks), and our six-month follow-up conversation revealed that she had not cut on herself after the lawyer changed tactics.

Being tentative simply means to remain in an exploratory frame of mind. The opposite of “definite,” the therapist remains open to additions, changes, and differences as long as the conversation continues. Although some reading this article may feel that both my client and I remained ignorant to the causes of her cutting behavior, I believe we both maintained an appropriate tentative stance on the cutting as well as her understanding of the cause of her cutting. Because observable goal achievement was possible (a significant decrease or end of cutting) and our joint assessment concluded that the cutting was not life-threatening, we allowed time for change and were rewarded. This may seem like a severe case, but compared to past self-abusive behavior this woman had engaged in and had successfully overcome, it was a reasonable approach to take. Staying tentative as long as possible (what others have called “not-

knowing”) and allowing meaning to both shape and fit experience is a test of one’s patience and one’s ideas about knowledge – it’s simple, but it’s not easy.

About Respect: Respect is socially negotiated. Because interpersonal distance, eye contact, pacing, and other nonverbal behavior is closely tied to one’s culture, gender, and other variables, the best way to teach respect is to teach social responsiveness. As my friend Bradford Keeney once said, the therapist must be “a chameleon on a mirror,” constantly shifting and being flexible. Respect is in the experience of the client, not in the intent of the therapist. Therefore, the solution-focused idea of “noticing” is not just for clients!

A client came to me for an initial session and began to relate a story which began, “Twelve years ago...”. After a minute or two, I asked a clarifying question. He responded, “Please, let me continue.” About five minutes later I had a moment in which I was a bit confused by a shift he made in his story, and I asked another small question. He said, “Please, do not interrupt me.” So, I sat back and listened attentively...for 40 minutes. At the end, he took a deep breath and said, “I have been rehearsing that (story) for 11 years and I’ve never told anyone. Thanks so much for listening. Now, what questions do you have?” I was so taken aback by his statement that I am certain I sat silently for at least 30 seconds! Finally, I asked him one question that his story had raised for me, and he told me I had hit upon something he had never thought of in 11 years of mental rehearsal! Our second session was his last; he had wrestled with my question, and this struggle plus our brief conversation had led to a solution to his dilemma. He guided me to show the respect his story required, and the change he experienced was directly related to the respect I was able to show. (If you want to know what the question was and his subsequent change, email me – I will be glad to add to this, but space limits me in this column.)

Although many may place emphasis upon certain interventive questions (such as the miracle question or scaling questions) as “basics,” I have come to believe that it is the stance or approach that makes one’s work solution-focused more than technique or formula. Maintaining curiosity, remaining tentative, and showing respect are all necessary for solution-focused practice.

As I write, news of the Tuusula school shooting has broken the hearts of the people of Suomi and many of us around the world. We in the U.S. are all too familiar with horrible events like this...my thoughts are with everyone touched by this tragedy.

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