



The Tools of Engagement *Taking the Escalator- Counselor Handbook*

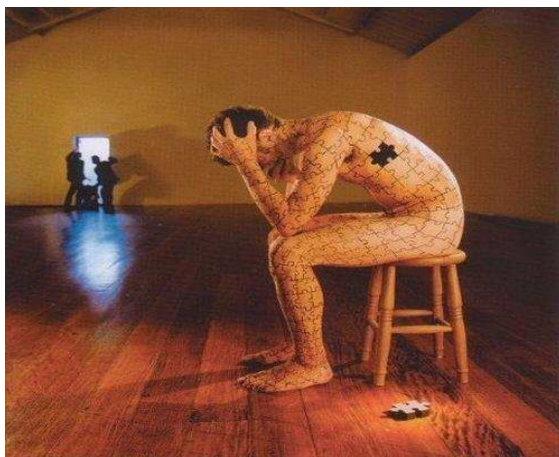
Introduction: The companion book to this one, *Taking the Escalator: Express* (2016) goes into great detail about many of the changes faced by substance abuse and mental health counselors in modern times when compared with the past. This book, *The Tools of Engagement*, provides counselors with the strategies, skills and of course tools to effectively engage and then help some of the more challenging clients we see in treatment in today's world. To get started and to put this into a simple perspective, review and consider the illustration below: *The Puzzle*, which compares counseling in the past "Then" with some of the new challenges we face "Now"

The Puzzle – Then and Now



Many counselors today first attend some kind of school and/or training program with youthful optimism about helping others. When a counselor first enters the field, particularly during school, there may be thoughts such as "I am going to be the person who people look too in order to put their lives back together" Perhaps you at one time thought similar thoughts early on in your career or perhaps you are still gaining experience now and you still may feel that way. Eventually all counselors experience what substance abuse and mental health counseling is really like in practice, and end up learning that things are somewhat different than expected. The following examples below compare counseling to solving a puzzle by contrasting some common expectations that less experienced counselors may hold, with some realities soon learned as hands-on counseling experienced is gained.

Then and Now: Putting the Pieces Together:



Then: Early on in one's career, a neophyte counselor may view substance abuse and mental health as merely helping someone find that "missing piece" in a their life and then skillfully helping put things back into place. Similar to the picture above, the counselor in this instance may feel that helping this client would just involve helping him put that last piece back into the puzzle, then he will feel "whole" again. Ah, if only it was that simple!



Now. With experience, most counselors find out that treatment is often not that easy in today's world. It is rarely as simple as just helping someone pick up that missing piece and put it all back together again. Things are usually much more elaborate and there typically are a whole lot more interconnected parts involved in working towards a solution. Sticking with this "puzzle" illustration, the following scenarios below are quite often the "norm" in the counseling world, especially when working with today's more challenging clients. Consider each one below:

More Pieces to the Puzzle: In today's complex world there are often many more pieces to the proverbial puzzle. Clients often have an extensive array of issues across a wide variety of life areas. There are often many pieces to the puzzle that first need to be identified, then sorted out, before even considering putting them back together. This is often no simple task



"Here You Go, Fix It" – Particularly in the world of substance abuse counseling, it is not the client his or herself seeking our assistance but often it is an external source handing over the proverbial puzzle to us with the hope that we can help "fix" the multitude of issues. Parents, spouses, probation officers, referring treatment providers or others are often the ones requesting our assistance in putting the pieces back together rather than the client asking for help him/herself. Often, we are on the receiving end of a referral for a client who has struggled with multiple treatment providers before us. There may be an unrealistic expectation that we will be the ones who finally "solves" the proverbial puzzle of issues associated with a particular client. Often our starting point may seem like quite a mess as opposed to a situation with a quick and clear solution



"Here you go, now put it all together and – Fix it!"

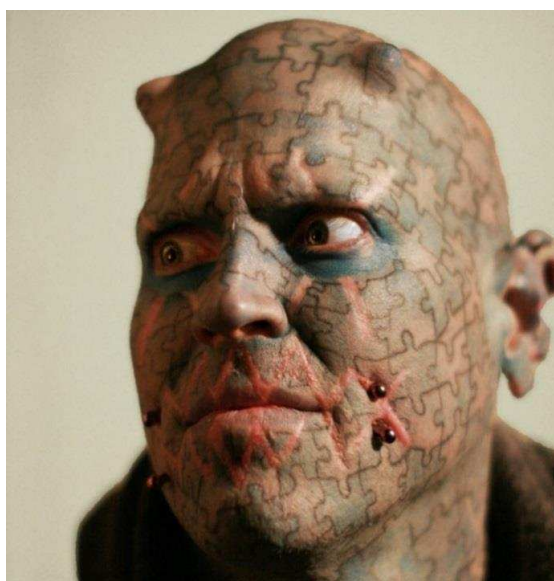


Cannot Find the Missing Piece – At times in spite of our best efforts as counselors, we may never really get to the bottom of some issues. “Why does this client keep relapsing, over and over and over again?” “When will this client ever be able to finally shake this long-lasting cloud of depression that seems to keep coming back?” These types of questions at times may go unanswered as there may be a missing “piece” that is holding things back for the client that they may not be disclosing. Or, the client may have no idea of what the missing piece to their proverbial puzzle even is. Whatever the case, some puzzles are not ours to “solve” as our work may be just one stop along a much longer road to healing



Finding the missing piece may feel like a mystery

Finally, You Think You’ve Got it All Together and ...Ugh! – It has been the experience of many counselors to have been in a situation where a lot of work was done and it looked like all of the pieces finally were coming together but surprisingly the end product was much different than what was expected. Fortunately more often than not things work out toward a sense of overall improvement but at other times our clients can really throw us for a loop. If only things always worked out just the way we expected them too!



The “pieces” do not always fit together the way we were expecting them too



Easy Answers Can be Much Harder to Come By – The client who comes into substance abuse or mental health counseling who “just needed a few coping skills” or “simply needed to be pointed in the right direction” still exists but is much less common than in the past. The work we put in as counselors in today’s more complex world is rarely ever a simple process with the majority of our clients.



It is rarely a “one-piece” solution

Clearly, the world in which we live has become more multi-faceted and tricky and therefore the clientele we so often face can be very challenging to work with. Where does one begin? It all starts with **engagement**, which will be discussed more in greater detail throughout the pages of this book. When a counselor has positive engagement skills, there is no end to the variety of types of people that may benefit from what he or she has to offer as a treatment provider and guide through the change process. To get started consider what skills you likely already have for effectively engaging challenging clients:

Opening Exercise – Getting Started

If you are a counselor reading this, think for a few minutes about a challenging individual whom you worked with either directly or indirectly. (If you have little or no experience, then try to imagine what a tough case may be like for you)

Now, while thinking about that tough person to work with, consider:

- The person’s attitude
- Difficult or challenging circumstances
- Things about the client that may have irritated you or “gotten under your skin”
- Ways you could not relate, identify with, or fully understand
- Limited resources, obstacles or other things that may have gotten in the way of success
- Other predictable or unforeseen obstacles that may have gotten in the way

It probably was not very difficult to think of someone who fit this mold, particularly if you have experience in the substance abuse or mental health treatment field. There are so many challenging clients we try to help on a regular basis. The reason for this opening exercise is to get you thinking about challenging clients. That is because this book is written by a counselor, for other counselors. It is about understanding then developing our own self-awareness as well as the essential tools and skills for engaging the more challenging clients we face in our practice.



Now, when considering this difficult client that you thought of for this exercise, think deeper about what skills, experiences and attributes that you already possess that are helpful in the process of developing a relationship, even with an extremely challenging client.

Consider:

- What qualities or attributes do you possess that you draw upon to be effective at forming positive relationships with people that you come across, even if they are being difficult?
- What tricks, skills, lessons, have you already learned about to engage individuals, groups and families?
- What is at least one thing that you need to get better at when it comes to working with resistant, unmotivated, or otherwise challenging clients?

The good news is that even if you are just beginning with little experience or if you are a long term veteran counselor with years working in the trenches of the field, you already possess a variety of skills for engaging difficult client. It is likely you would never have been drawn to this field unless you had some natural aptitude for talking with people, even when they are unmotivated, resistant, argumentative, rude, unpleasant, divisive or otherwise difficult to work with. You surely have developed your own methods and techniques for engaging challenging clients based on your experiences and based on your own natural personality traits. There are probably many other people in your life who helped you hone your craft when it comes to being engaging and effective as a counselor. This book will help you use what you already have based on your own knowledge and experiences. It will also help you identify your own areas of strength in the engagement process and at the same time it will help you look into areas you need to work on. There even may be an idea or two that you haven't thought of or a new angle that you can pursue and build upon in your own personal engagement "tool box". However as we face new challenges in the counseling field our skills are regularly tested. Therefore it is always a good thing to keep developing our skills with changing times and varying situations in an ever-changing world. Whatever setting, modality, specialty or circumstance we may find ourselves in as counselors or helping professionals, the critical relationships and therapeutic bonds we form with those people we are trying to help all starts with **engagement**.

What is engagement? When it comes to helping others, *engagement is everything*. Think for a second about those people in your life who have helped you, regardless of the issue at hand. Consider your favorite teacher or your mentor or the family member, co-worker or friend in your life who provided you with the most guidance and support. A strong reason why that person had such an



impact on you is because of their ability to engage you as a person. That person not only demonstrated the wisdom needed to help you but he or she also had that special approach that you needed at the right time in order to tune in, listen, learn and change. People try to scatter “seeds” of knowledge and wisdom all day long in today’s world, particularly with the prevalence of social media. However, when it comes down to it, the “soil” of our hearts and minds is much more likely to germinate and blossom into action when the person sowing the seed has engaged our thoughts, feelings, conscience, heart and intellect. Engagement therefore is all about making these critical interpersonal connections.

Therefore if you are a counselor or other helping professional, it is essential to be more than just a “listening ear” and a source of helpful information. Although both of those qualities (listening ability and information-providing) are vital to the helping process, quite often engagement takes precedence. Engagement builds the bridge for the fundamental person to person exchange needed between counselor and client. For example, in order to facilitate the process of getting a client to open up so that you can be there to listen, engagement is needed first. Likewise, in order to have the opportunity to provide information that does not fall on deaf ears, engagement is foremost in facilitating and opening up that process.

We will discuss in more detail later how engagement can be easy when it comes naturally. Working in the counseling field we are bound to come across individuals with whom we form a strong therapeutic connection quickly and easily. The real challenge of engagement occurs when that connection does not come naturally or easily. Or, when there are multiple obstacles to engagement it critical to have a skill set and body of knowledge to effectively overcome these obstacles and other challenges. Also there is the issue of engagement with groups which provides the added challenge of having to engage several individuals all at once, while also separately engaging the group as a whole. Ah, how easy counseling would be if we only worked with clients whom we easily liked and felt comfortable bonds with. In reality we are responsible to do our best to try to engage and form connections with all of those individuals, groups and families that we may face as helpers, both the easy to work with and the more challenging.

This manual is designed to accompany the primary “*Taking the Escalator*” text. *Taking the Escalator* explains in detail the Escalator Methodology, which is a method for overcoming substance use and related coexisting issues, by focusing on insight and motivation as the guiding factors for change. *Taking the Escalator* is adaptable from a variety of perspectives as it was written for people seeking help themselves, counselors, as well as for concerned family members of people with substance use issues and related coexisting issues. This manual however is written *specifically for counselors*. The information to follow is focused on the skills and perspectives needed for counselors to effectively engage those people we are trying to help with their substance use and coexisting issues from the unique, person- centered motivational approach encouraged by the Escalator method.

Practice over Theory

Most counselors are required to achieve a certain level of education before being allowed to practice. Furthermore, after obtaining a certification or license in counseling in most areas across the world, there is usually an ongoing continuing education requirement. Education is therefore determined to be an essential aspect of developing our skills as counselors, regardless of one’s specialty. Education involves ongoing instruction and the exchange of new information and varying theoretical perspectives. Theory is important as it provides a foundation for our work. However, often what



transcends theory in our daily lives are those tidbits of information that are considered to be *practical*

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***Practical** - of, involving, or concerned with experience or actual use; not theoretical

One goal of this book is to outline many practical suggestions that counselors can use every day in their practice to become better counselors. In the substance abuse and mental treatment fields, the challenges are ever increasing. Therefore it is critical that counselors develop a wide array of practical tools for engaging the individuals and groups we face each day. This book provides a handsome set of practical tools for your counseling toolbox for repeated use.

With that said, however, before we get into the *Tools of Engagement*, the following chapter to follow first starts off by providing the basic theoretical framework for the actual use of these essential counseling tools. Once the theoretical foundation is established, a host of practical skills and tools follows directly afterward

* All definitions throughout this book shared from <http://www.dictionary.com>



Tools of the Trade

Tool n. – anything used as a means of accomplishing a task or purpose: *Education is a tool for success.*

We have all done it: unscrewed a screw with a butter knife or unclogged the sink with a wire hanger. But you can only get by with “winging it” for so long. When serious work needs to get done, it is essential to have the right tools available.

Imagine if you called a contractor to fix something very important in your home and he walked in with some super glue, rope, duct tape, a hammer and few rusty old screwdrivers in his tool box. Surely there is no way you would allow that person to work on your home. Simply put, we need tools to get a job done. Anyone who has ever taken on a project without having the right tools has learned to appreciate the value of having *the right tools for the right jobs*. The same concept of tools, and their overall importance applies to substance abuse and mental health treatment. Learning to overcome substance abuse, addiction and related mental health issues is a huge challenge so it is essential that anyone working on these issues have the right tools and know how to use them.

Because this manual encourages the use of tools, you will notice several links throughout the text. One link that you should get into the habit of checking regularly is the www.takingtheescalator.com website which provides a wide array of counseling tools which are free for your repeated use as a counselor. These *escalator* counseling tools are currently being used across the world particularly with difficult to engage clients in therapy, due to lower insight or motivation levels.



www.takingtheescalator.com