



Tool # 9 – Taking an Interest



One might read the title to this and ask “Taking an interest? Is something that seems so simple, a tool?” The answer is that taking an interest is most certainly an important tool for engaging any client, particularly challenging individuals and groups. Often, taking an interest is not as simple as it sounds. Sadly, taking an interest is easy when a client is interesting, but unfortunately that is not always the case. The section of this book about being nonjudgmental is similar to this one as that section explained that at times we are going to feel judgmental and we cannot expect to like all of our clients the same, in spite of always treating them all fairly. Similarly, we cannot expect to always naturally take an interest in what our clients are talking about. At times a session can even be quite boring. For example, most experienced therapists have had their share of “Groundhog Day” clients. What is being referred to here is when each new session seems like an exact repeat of the sessions before. The Groundhog Day phenomenon (which references the popular 1993 movie) often occurs when the client is fixated on venting about the same problems session after session without really ever doing anything significant about it, making all the sessions feel redundant. It can be quite difficult to listen in such a situation and taking an interest can seem like a test of one’s endurance. Similarly, some of our clients have dynamic personalities or are great storytellers or they are interested in things that we too are genuinely interested in hearing about so taking an interest can be a breeze and can be quite enjoyable. However when a client’s narrative is difficult to listen to because it just is not interesting or easy to follow then counselors have to use unique skills involved in “taking an interest” as a specialized counseling tool for engagement.

Someone reading this may at first reason that this honest viewpoint sounds a bit unkind or insincere. First, in order to understand this point better, it is important to note that the vast majority of counselors (myself included) chose the counseling profession because of a sincere interest and passion for empathetically connecting verbally with others as they open up about their lives and their problems. Capable, concerned, compassionate and caring listeners are drawn to the counseling field. Counselors truly enjoy listening to a wide variety of people express their thoughts and feelings across the full spectrum of life areas, from their past, present and future. If a counselor does not feel that he or she is a “people-person” as well as a good listener then he or she is in clearly the wrong field. The main point of this topic is however that regardless of how much of a “people person” and good listener one may be by nature, no one is interested all of the time to the same degree. Sometimes listening is effortless and enjoyable, and at other times it requires increased active effort and focus. Therefore it is important to be able to take a sincere interest even when there is limited “natural” interest in a session. Therein lies the basis of the skill we are discussing in this section.

Getting back to the concept of taking an interest as a tool for engagement, it is critically important to take an interest in our clients, however this is even more critical when working with resistant, unmotivated or otherwise challenging clients. If a counselor is utilizing “fishing for values” (as we discussed in the previous section), and then the client begins sharing a subject based on his or her values, it is essential that the counselor immediately show an interest. The counselor needs to be ready to draw that client in to continue opening up and sharing when a subject of value is touched upon. To the contrary, if a guarded or resistant client opens up to start talking but then the counselor



fails to show an interest, then that would be a wasted opportunity for engagement and rapport building. To be able to quickly “lock in”, connect and then show interest when these moments arise in difficult sessions is an indispensable tool for engaging guarded clients

The key to developing increased interest for engagement, particularly when this does not occur as a natural part of the session, involves two skills:

1. It is critical to be able to still **connect with our clients’ passion** for a subject even when the subject matter itself is of no personal interest to you.
2. It is also essential to be skilled at **asking the right follow up questions** based on our connection with our client’s passion and interest, with the goal of generating sustained meaningful discussion and enhanced rapport building

1 - Connecting with our client’s passion:

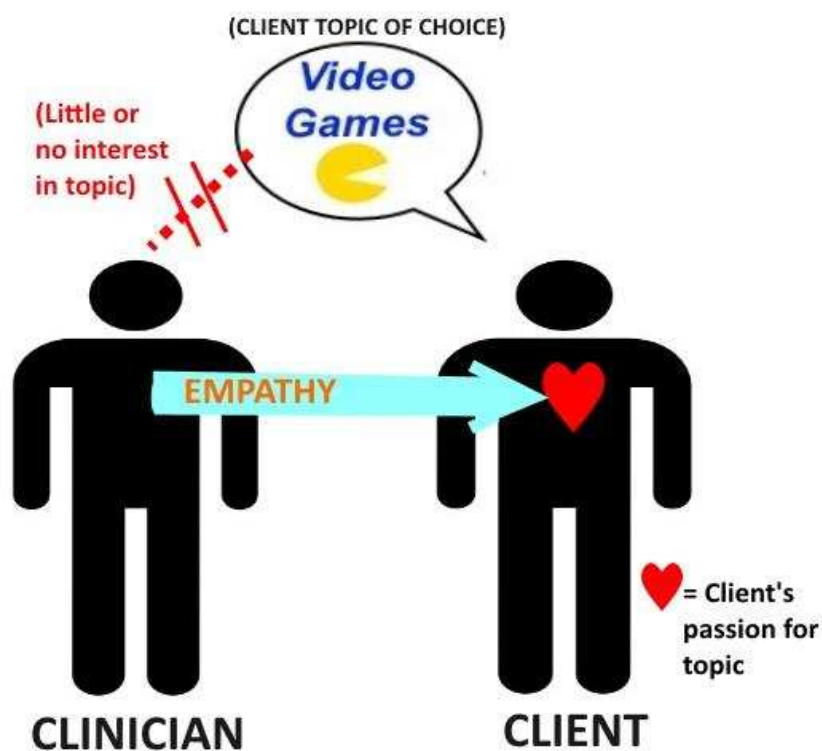
Exercise: To get started, think of a topic that you have almost no interest in, that a client may want to open up to you about.

Often our age and place in life at any given time greatly affects our areas of interest. For the sake of this exercise, let’s consider the topic of *video games*. There was a time, over 20 years ago, when I could carry on an interesting discussion about video games. As a person now in my 40’s who no longer plays video games I really do not personally care too much about them any longer. For example, you would never catch me reading an article on the latest game system other than if I was purchasing one for one of my kids. Otherwise I am just not interested in video games so it is a subject I care little about personally. Interestingly, however, when working with adolescents, video games is a common subject. In fact, I have worked with clients who initially really only wanted to discuss video games and little else. Therefore, going forward with this topic we will use video games as an example, but in your own mind, you may want to consider any topic that is not of interest to you whether that is sports, a certain television show, a type of music, etc. Think about anything that you have little personal interest in discussing or learning anything more about.

The Escalator Method shares with Motivational Interviewing, an emphasis on the importance of expressing empathy. When taking an interest in a topic, if there is little personal interest, empathy is of the utmost importance. We can still connect with our client’s passion and enthusiasm for a subject through our ability to utilize empathy. We can work on understanding our client’s interest in the subject by focusing on what that interest does for that individual on a personal, emotional, and even on a spiritual level. When you are not yourself interested in the topic, you can build on your ability to appreciate your client’s level of passion for the topic itself, as opposed to the actual subject matter. Your interest and understanding for your client’s passion can then instigate a mutually experienced form of synergy in the session that is quite powerful. To explain this phenomenon, using the example of video games, as expressed earlier, if a client was describing his or her affinity for video games and I personally had no interest in video games, how then can I sincerely use this topic for engagement? In this case, as discussed, I would use the power of empathy to bridge the gap between the client’s interest on the topic itself with my appreciation for his or her excitement, dedication, affection, zeal, dedication and/or enthusiasm for video games. I would focus on connecting with how that client must feel about video games in spite of my personal lack of interest in video games. Using empathy I would connect with how meaningful video games is to this individual from that individual’s shared perspective. Once a clinician has locked in to this collaboration of interest, a positive symbiosis can be formed that can be highly energetic and persuasive in the engagement process. In this case, the term symbiosis is appropriate as the overall interconnection between client and clinician is mutually beneficial in spite of initially being derived from two different perspectives. The client can then share



freely about this topic and using empathy the therapist can sincerely still connect with the client through his or her level of interest and then form a bond based on that connection. This bond can transcend the fact that the clinician may not have a personal interest in the topic. The diagram below illustrates this idea:



Once an empathetic connection is made with the topic of client interest, then the clinician must follow up with appropriate questions to inspire a deeper and lasting therapeutic alliance. This leads us to our second key point:

2 - Asking the Right Follow up Questions: “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out” (Proverbs 20:5). This short proverb is relevant as it summarizes the importance of insightful and understanding questions to “draw out” what is in our client’s heart, or inner self. Once we connect with someone’s passion, interests and values, it is then just as important to deepen the connection through the right kinds of questions.

We need to remember and restate the reality that at times the subject matter that our client values may in actuality be of little or no personal interest to us. It may be a subject that if left to our own choices we personally may have no interest in learning about that subject ourselves. Nevertheless, when sensing a client’s passion for a topic particularly when this is a difficult to engage client, it becomes essential to lock in to the client and draw out his or her enthusiasm to open up, using this topic as a doorway for further discussion and rapport-building. This is where effective use of questions comes to the fore.

This idea of taking an interest when there is no interest through appropriate questions may sound like it is “easier said, than done”. From a practical perspective, how can a counselor use generate and then ask effective questions for engagement?



Again, consider empathy. How can you allow your empathy with the client's passion and interest spur you to ask relevant questions and to generate further conversation in the therapy session? There are the clear and distinct types of probes that can be used regardless of the topic such as questions in the vein of: "What's that like?" or "Give me an example..." or "What's your favorite thing about..." However, rather than consider an arbitrary and obvious list of questions, it makes more sense to consider the overall perspective the counselor needs to take in order to enhance the interpersonal connection with our client in relation to the topic at hand. What can be extremely helpful for counselors, from a perspective of empathy is to imagine a subject that you are passionate about. If working with a young person you may even want to consider an area you were excited about at a similar age. Then, when you can identify with your own enthusiasm, you can consider the types of questions you would enjoy being asked that would get you talking. As an example, a subject I am personally enthusiastic about is *basketball*. Considering my own personal interest in basketball, I could then consider what kinds of questions I would enjoy being asked in a conversation with someone who is showing interest in my love for basketball. Some examples that come to mind are:

Ask self...

- What are my favorite things about **basketball**?
- How did I come to like **basketball**?
- What is my favorite **basketball** team? Who are my favorite **basketball** players?
- How and when do I watch **basketball**? ...and play **basketball**?
- What is it about **basketball** that I like when compared to other sports?
- Tell me about the **basketball** game you watched last night? How was it?

This list could go on and on but what is important is that by first using self-awareness, I can then use these questions as a model for showing interest in others (even when interest is not "naturally" present). In the examples above, the word basketball is highlighted for a reason. When working with the client who is interested in video games, that topic (video games) could easily be inserted in the places where it says basketball above. With a few minor adjustments (such as asking about video game characters instead of basketball players, I then have used my awareness of my own interests to increase my consciousness and awareness for relevant follow up questions for my client about his interests (which in this example as we have stated is video games)

Now ask client...

- What are your favorite things about **video games**?
- How did you come to like **video games**?
- What is your favorite **video game title**? Who are your favorite **video game characters**?
- How and when do you play **video games**?
- What is it about **your favorite video game** that you like when compared with other **video games**?
- Tell me about the **video game** you played last night? How was it?

Taking an interest is critically important as a tool for engagement and it should never be underemphasized or overlooked even though on the surface it may seem quite simple. If you plan on having success with challenging clients then your ability to skillfully take an interest in any subject that may come up has unlimited value with a wide array of clients from diverse backgrounds and age groups. Your ability to synthesize interest when there may initially be a lack, followed by your skill at generating intriguing follow up questions on that topic will serve as an excellent formula for getting difficult clients opening up and talking time and time again.