



Engagement Tool: Be Positive

Let's face it, dealing with substance use and coexisting issues can at times involve some harsh realities. Quite often people that enter substance abuse treatment do so right after something really negative happened in their life like an arrest, threats from family, job loss, etc. Depending upon where you work, you may not often see a lot of smiling faces coming through your doors of people enthusiastically ready to embrace change so that they can live happier healthier lives. As a result of all of the negativity so often associated with substance abuse and related coexisting issues, it really makes a difference that as counselors *we make a consistent effort to remain a positive force for change.*



By the time most people reach counseling with us, they have already heard repeatedly about “Jails Institutions and Death”, and other doom and gloom scenarios involving pending future losses and tragedies from friends, family, probation officers, bosses, etc. I am not saying that a discussion of actual and potential consequences of substance abuse is not a critical part of substance abuse treatment because, to the contrary, teaching consequential thinking is one of the best tools a person can learn in life. Rather, the idea here is that, as counselors if consequences and doom and gloom are all we bring to the table we are going to lose a lot of those people who most need our help. Once again, it is important to interject some positive energy into this situation.

Did you ever go to a friend for help and all that he or she focused on was everything you are doing wrong and all the bad that is going to happen to you? Although sometimes that information can be effective for motivation, a truly encouraging friend who you most likely would want to return to for help would be one who also provided encouragement, hope and enthusiasm. It is good to be able to hear constructive criticism and warnings from those who care about us, but more often we will be drawn to want to return to talk again with a friend who makes us feel good about ourselves and who takes the time to acknowledge the positive that we are doing.

In a similar manner, if we as counselors are working with people who are apprehensive about getting help in the first place, if we truly want to keep people coming back it is important that we make an effort to be positive and also notice the positive. This is even true in response to a setback with someone's progress. It is important to learn from the negative choices and circumstances that may have contributed to a setback as a crucial learning experience for our clients. As important it is for our



clients to learn from mistakes, it is just as important for the counselor to acknowledge what was done right as well. It almost always could have been worse. Consider an example:

Yvonne – “I was clean for three months but I got upset yesterday at my boyfriend and I went for a drive to try to relax and ended up at my cousin’s house and drank all night, now my father wants to throw me out of the house again for getting drunk.”

COUNSELOR – “You know better than that. We were just talking about how your cousin is bad news for you but you went over there anyway and look at what happened! You know what you did this to yourself and I can’t blame your father for wanting to kick you out.”

On the surface, the counselor’s response may not seem so bad because it is true. But from the clients perspective what the counselor is saying is really just restating the obvious and it offers no hope or encouragement. Yvonne in that example may end up feeling like the counselor is proverbially “kicking her when she is already down.” A much better response based on the “*Be Positive*” principle would be:

COUNSELOR – “OK, it sounds like you had a rough night there. We can talk about where to go from here. First, I want to acknowledge that it is great that you were honest with me about what happened. Also, you woke up in the morning and you stopped drinking and you got yourself to your appointment with me today. That says a lot about your commitment to trying to stick with this and I commend you for that. Remember the last time you drank three months ago? I didn’t see or hear from you for three weeks after that. Although you slipped up last night, you are still making overall progress in a lot of ways

Yvonne – Thanks, I really appreciate that. Part of me wanted to keep on binge drinking but your right, another part of me wanted to stop which is new for me because I was able to actually do that this time! I’m really glad I made it in to see you.

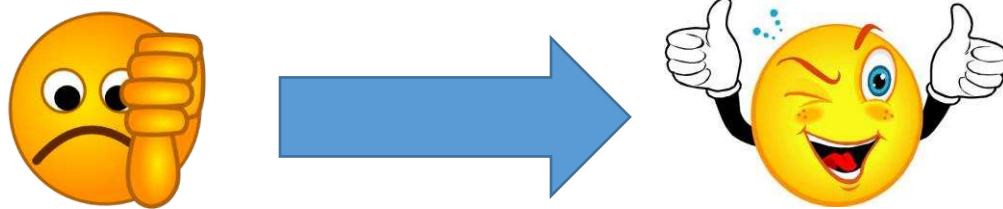
Clearly, in this second scenario Yvonne is feeling much more encouraged and empowered to get herself back on the right track. The counselor’s efforts to be positive in the face of a negative situation was extremely helpful

The following are some basic points about making sure to “Be Positive” as a counselor:

>*Avoid overwhelming others with criticism* – Constructive criticism can be helpful on occasion if delivered tactfully to a willing listener but it has its time and its place. Just like parenting a child, the positive statements that you express, should by far outweigh the negative observations that you choose to verbalize. The less you know a client, the less you should even consider saying something that could be viewed as critical. You can “earn” the right to give more direct feedback with your clients only after establishing a trusting relationship over time but even in those situations it is important to be cautious and discerning with your choice of words. In addition it is always best to ask a client’s permission before giving any kind of constructive feedback. Overall though, as a general rule, expressing feedback that may be viewed or interpreted as negative or critical by our clients should be the exception in the counseling setting as opposed to the norm. If a client views you as too critical that can be discouraging and really hurt rapport and engagement. The next several points focus more on the importance of leaning toward the positive:



>Look for the good in your clients and acknowledge it openly and often, but be sincere. – It is good to keep your “antenna” up to be sensitive to noticing and acknowledging client strengths and things that they do well. For example, suppose that you notice that someone you are working with speaks very articulately and clearly despite the fact that they dropped out of high school, due to a large part to drug use and unmediated mental health issues. To acknowledge something like “I know that before you said you dropped out of school years ago, but I can tell by the way you speak you really are quite an intelligent person” This person may have heard for the past bunch of years from their family how stupid he or she is for quitting school and your sincere and genuine expressions to this person may mean a lot to them. There is nothing wrong with expressing complements as long as they are **appropriate** and **sincere** (To complement someone, you must believe what you are saying otherwise your insincerity will show through. Also it is important to have a sense of how certain types of complements can give the wrong message to a client and thus be inappropriate, such as complementing someone on their looks, which could leave a client with a wrong impression)



>Learn to turn a negative to a positive- Consider again the case of Yvonne at the beginning of this chapter. That is an excellent example of the counselor turning a negative into a positive. Quite often the people we are trying to help, beat themselves up over their own mistakes. While it is important to use our clients’ setbacks as learning experiences by examining where things went wrong for them, it is also just as important to make sure to give a degree of attention to what they did right. The counselor can use the setback as not only an opportunity for learning but also as an opportunity for encouragement and support. One positive thing to acknowledge on just about any occasion when a client shares the details of a recent setback is to make sure to acknowledge how great it is that the client was honest with you about what happened rather than hiding it. Also recognizing how positive it is that the client made it back into treatment after their relapse is commendable. It is positive to look at the ways in which the client may have taken steps, even while high or drunk, to prevent things from getting even worse, which also can be reassuring and relieving. The old adage, “if you fall of the horse, get right back on” is a simple yet encouraging way to frame setbacks and relapse in a way that inspires our client to keep on moving forward in a positive manner regardless of their mistakes

>Never underestimate the power of encouragement – It is a good practice to provide some encouragement **in every session** you provide as a counselor. There is enough doom and gloom to go around in the world today so it is important for us to serve as a consistent source of strength, courage, and enthusiasm for our clients. The primary rule for encouragement is that it is practical and meaningful. If it’s from the heart, simple and even small doses of encouragement can be very empowering. For more information on this topic read: “The Right Dose” - https://www.academia.edu/27326058/The_Right_Dose Encouragement is closely linked with hope. It is essential we continually strive to be a source of hope for all of our clients, no matter how dark things may get in an individual’s personal situation.

“Encouragement is like water to the soul, it makes everything grow.”
– Chris Burkmenn



>*Don't be a "Downer"* – Tales of relapse and struggle can be motivating, however these stories should be used judiciously and at the proper time. If a counselor repeatedly brings to the session "tales of woe" surrounding the story of some unfortunate person who ended up in jail or dead or some other awful consequence, that can actually have a discouraging effect instead of a motivating one, particularly when the flow of negativity is unrelenting. Do not be mistaken, at times relatable stories about another person's negative consequences of their poor choices can be an excellent learning tool for our clients. Nevertheless, a counselor should avoid the habit of allowing negative examples and gloomy anecdotes to be the predominant part of one's counseling repertoire. I can remember when I was a kid in 9th grade, my school had a drug prevention speaker come in and tell story after story after story about people dying, going insane, and doing unthinkable things to hurt themselves and others because of drugs. I honestly do not think that his overly negative tactic deterred anyone in the crowd because collectively it was all way over the top and too much to believe. To the contrary, mixing in some stories of success is an effective way to counteract an otherwise constant flow of doom and gloom. In fact, a good success story can be extremely valuable as it can be used over and over with new clients. In addition, when clients learn that others in their situation pulled through with a positive outcome that is an excellent source of realistic hope to strive for.

- *For example, *Mike (*Name changed):* Mike owned his own lucrative business for decades but then was injured after years of success. He started taking pain medication and became addicted and when the scripts ran out he eventually turned to heroin which then ended up in Mike being arrested multiple times for drug possession and other drug related crimes. That then led to jail, then prison, then to parole. Upon release from prison, Mike was mandated for substance abuse treatment and also as part of Mike's parole he was forced to work a minimum wage job at a fast food restaurant as that was the only place that would take him with his multiple felony convictions. Mike's old business was long gone due to his addiction. Interestingly, rather than gripe about how the fast food job's pay was drastically less than he was used to making, Mike personally made a decision to be the best fast food worker he could be under the circumstances. Mike stayed late and pitched in extra whenever the fast food place was short staffed or otherwise in need of extra help. Mike also took extra time to clean, organize and repair things around the store when things were slow. From there, Mike received a series of promotions and raises due to his dedication to being "the best fast food worker he could be." In less than two years this Mike went from being an entry-level fast food cashier to being promoted to a salaried management position overseeing the maintenance crew for multiple stores with full benefits and a company car. This came about all because he took the minimum wage job so seriously and patiently moved up the "ladder" – Since working with Mike, on many occasions I have heard many other clients on parole complain when they are forced to work a minimum wage job. Mike's story is an inspirational and true story that I have used repeatedly as a source of encouragement for many clients in Mike's situation. Positive stories like this one can have a huge impact.



>*Being right is overrated.* The basic gist of this idea is as follows: If you, as the counselor, have a different viewpoint than a client or group of clients that you are working with, it really doesn't matter how "right" that you feel that you are. What matters more is your ability to generate open discussion with others who may have a different viewpoint than you. The goal is to work toward getting others to at least try to *understand* your side, even if they *don't agree* with it – (*This is the concept of Empathy without Agreement which is explained in greater detail later in this book*). Taking the "expert" approach turns most difficult clients off and usually only serves to make them more defensive. Below is an example:

GROUP of CLIENTS – "There is nothing wrong with weed, marijuana is not a drug, it doesn't harm anyone like heroin and crack"

COUNSELOR – (Mistakenly taking the "expert" approach) – "I have done the research and marijuana is a dangerous drug and it is both a gateway drug and highly addictive. I know what I am talking about, I have been doing this for years so I suggest you listen"

GROUP – "No way man, you don't know what you're talking about. Here is the research that we know that marijuana is harmless.... (Pro-marijuana facts shared) [Interestingly, there is even an application that you can get on your phone that provides pro-marijuana research for people in these discussions, which I have seen myself in action]

The approach in the above scenario in which the counselor wanted the group to listen to him as the "expert" only hurt his credibility with the group. The counselor was over-concerned with his stance of being "right." Now consider a better response to the same group:

GROUP of CLIENTS – "There is nothing wrong with weed, marijuana is not a drug, it doesn't harm anyone"

COUNSELOR – (Understanding that being right is overrated and taking a softer, empathetic approach as a much better way to respond) - "I hear you. It is definitely true that marijuana is not as harmful as drugs like cocaine and heroin, but, even if you don't agree with it, does anyone in here understand why people say that marijuana is a gateway drug?"

GROUP – "Yeah, people say that when you smoke weed it can get boring after a while so you might move on to something harder after a while. But that's not going to happen to me"

COUNSELOR – "OK then, does anyone in the group know anyone who that has happened too?"

GROUP MEMBER– "Yeah, I have a couple of friends who started messing with benzos and prescription opiates because they got tired of just smoking weed. They are stupid. ANOTHER GROUP MEMBER – Yeah actually it happened to me this summer, I started doing ecstasy a lot more because weed wasn't as exciting any more..."

The main point is that in the second approach, when the counselor chose not to take the "I am the expert" stance, a lot more insightful and honest conversation ensued. Taking the "I am right, and you are wrong" approach often just sparks a futile debate which is counterproductive. So in the end, it is less important how "right" that you may feel that you are as a counselor, but rather it is of much greater importance to enhance your ability to facilitate mutual empathy and understanding through



honest, positive and open discussion even when discussing debatable issues. This is all part of *being positive* especially when working with resistant clients

>*You don't have to like someone to be a good counselor with a positive attitude.* That statement may sound controversial to some people. It unrealistic to believe that we, as counselors can afford to treat only the people that we like, because that is just unfair. It is also unrealistic to believe that we can make ourselves like all of the people we try to help. I think it is easier sometimes to help people that we like however working with people we do not like and still having success is the real litmus test of a good counselor. In a way, it is almost a form of discrimination to only help those people that we like. Ethically and morally, as counselors, we need to be there and try to do our best for everyone. Some key points to understand that will help counselors work with all kinds of people, regardless of how we may feel personally about are as follows:

- Counselors can and should show qualities like: warmth, genuineness, respect, empathy, trust, and acceptance to all clients regardless of personal feelings and opinions about someone or something objectionable that a person may have done. Our clients should all equally feel they are being treated with respect. Some basic principles to remember when working with every one of your clients
 - All of your clients and their families deserve respectful treatment
 - All of your clients and their families deserve equal, impartial treatment
 - All of your clients and their families deserve honest treatment
 - All of your clients and their families deserve the best you have to offer.

- Counselors often need to learn to suspend their own personal judgments and values when working with others. All counselors are required to do their best to be as nonjudgmental as possible. As harsh as this sounds, if you are prone to being judgmental you should not be in the counseling field and you definitely should not be a substance abuse counselor unless you can somehow work to change that rather quickly. If you are judgmental, clients will sense it time and time again. However, once again it is unrealistic to believe that as a counselor, you will never feel negative feelings about someone or something adversely negative that this individual may have done. When that happens, it is important that we learn to work past our feelings that may be triggered by our own values. Our clients need to feel safe telling us about things that they have done without fear of judgment. Therefore it is important to learn when to empathetically use the context of the client's values instead of our own. Our values as counselors are important because part of our job is to help our clients work toward improved sense of values for themselves, which we want to model. However, when dealing with sensitive subjects when clients are opening up to us about unpleasant things, then we need to be able to "check our values at the door" so we can listen empathetically without judgment.

- Never give up your efforts at staying positive, encouraging, empathetic and hopeful even when faced with negative situations, attitudes and circumstances

If you stay positive, good things and good people will be drawn to you. - Mary Lou Retton



- Allow empathy to triumph over judgment – Focus on understanding why someone behaved the way they did rather than focusing on your own personal beliefs as to why what they did is wrong. If we personally think what someone did is wrong and the client feels differently than it is critical to actively shift our focus toward empathy. As counselors, we need to be able to get into our client’s world and see things from where they see them, often leaving behind our own views temporarily so we can understand theirs. Empathy, is the key to solving this problem. When we can empathize with someone, even when we do not agree with them we can still form and maintain a close bond in treatment. We will get more into the concept of “Empathy without Agreement” later in this book but the key aspect is that one can work toward building and gaining understanding something even when they personally agree with it.



Nonjudgmental Empathy is a key aspect of the counseling process, however most counselors will agree that this may be "easier said, than done" in some challenging situations, due to our own human inclinations and values. Therefore the following sections is an honest look at what it takes to strive to be nonjudgmental in the counseling process

Make sure to read: [Judging What it Really Means to be Nonjudgmental](#)



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