



Engagement Tool – Values

Value: n. – *relative worth, merit or importance*



If you are working to engage effectively with anyone, values is at the core of that process. When you peel back the layers behind emotions, thinking, and behavior, people's values are truly the bottom line. Values are the driving factor. To be in tune with our client's values is to be connected with the foundation of people's inner self and their inherent desires. Our values may have more to do with who we are at any given point in life than just about any other factor.

Therefore, when using values for engagement in counseling, it necessary to develop a heightened sensitivity toward our client's personal sense of values. In that regard, remaining attuned to our client's values is in itself a "tool" for those people we are trying to help, particularly with challenging clients who may not openly be giving us much to work with. A client who is resistant to opening up and sharing, or a client who is only sharing superficially often may increase the depth of their connection with the therapist when topics of value to the client are addressed. An excellent example of this would be working with the angry teenager who is forced into treatment who refuses to engage in any meaningful conversation in the counseling session who opens up ever so slightly when the counselor hits on a topic of interest and importance to that client. Quite often a critical tool effective counselors must develop for successful engagement is "*Fishing for Values*"



Fishing for Values may seem contraindicated when considering traditional Motivational Interviewing (MI) techniques. Remember that one of the primary strategies with MI is reflective listening. Reflective listening requires that the counselor have something of substance to reflect back to the client. Again when using the example of the angry teenager who refuses to talk, it is often the case that reflective listening may be of limited use when this youth isn't giving the therapist much to work with. Simply put, one cannot reflect on nothing. It is like trying to play catch with someone who does not throw the ball back. So at times it becomes the counselor's task to actively search for a topic of interest that the resistant client is willing to comment on. In this type of scenario, fishing for values is an alternative approach. Fishing for values is exactly what it sounds like, in that it involves the therapist "casting out"



various forms of “bait” to see if the resistant client will “bite” followed by then carefully “reeling in” skillfully and gently so as not to break the “line” (or connection). The key concept involved with the bait involves attempting to learn about what the client values using a series of effective questions while simultaneously preventing the session from feeling like an interrogation. This process requires a delicate balance on behalf of the therapist.

The concept of fishing for values coincides with the simple rule discussed earlier: “*Take time to engage*”. When working with challenging clients it may take multiple sessions of conversation which on a surface level may seem insignificant. However, even seemingly insignificant conversation in a session with a client who was previously unwilling to talk, is in fact very significant particularly when conversation is geared toward learning about the client’s values. The following real life example illustrates this point:



Tim*, the Angry Surfer: (*Name changed.) Two parents brought in their 16 year old son for individual therapy due to his ongoing anger issues and defiant attitude in combination with alcohol and marijuana use. According to Tim’s parents, he had always been a “handful” to deal with since birth but for the most part they had a close relationship with Tim and he was generally cooperative prior to adolescence. Progressively over the past few years Tim’s substance use increased and his attitude worsened as he became increasingly more difficult to talk too and he also became more isolative from his parents. Tim’s parents brought him to multiple therapists but he always quit after a session or two stating he did not like the therapist.

It was my turn to try my best to engage Tim to participate in therapy. I met initially with Tim and his parents but soon I found myself alone in a room with angry Tim who made it clear he did not want to be there. As expected my initial efforts to engage Tim in conversation about why he was in treatment provided little of substance to work with other than Tim expressing annoyance with his parents, the situation, my agency, and society as a whole for not just leaving him alone to have his fun. Other than that, Tim remained obstinate in his effort to be resistant, guarded and quiet and would he did not respond with initial efforts to engage him where he was at. Fishing for values was indicated as a needed approach in this situation and was thus utilized in this counseling session.

In an effort to *fish for values*, I tried the usual methods for generating some meaningful conversation with Tim but he just would not show any interest as he had been through counseling before and knew the drill. It was time to start thinking outside of the box and to start looking for cues to determine what is important to Tim, besides just smoking marijuana. Tim looked like an “out-doorsy” type possibly into sports but when asked about some traditional sports like baseball, football, basketball, and others, there was no interest shown. We went through some other subjects usually interesting to kids such as music, relationships, school, movies and others but still Tim gave me little to nothing to work with. One thing I did know that he seemed to like was smoking weed so a typical “go to” question to work into the fray was “What is something you like to do when you are high?” For the first time, there was a subtle shift in his body language and a slight gleam in his eye that was not there before as he replied, “I like to smoke a bowl and then go surfing when I can” At that point, I realized that fishing for values



had gotten me a proverbial “bite” as it was clear that surfing was a subject of value. In the effort to engage Tim, I proceeded to let him tell me all about his surfing and weed smoking and it opened the door to some ice breaking conversation for the remainder of the session.

Not long after the session was over Tim’s parents called. I asked how they thought things went after driving home with Tim in the car. Tim’s parents stated the following: “Well, he seemed to like you and he agreed to come back for more sessions...But, he said that all that you guys talking about was surfing?!?” My response to the parents was to tell them that they were right, Tim and I primarily discussed surfing. However I explained to Tim’s parents that surfing was the subject that just so happened to be the only topic that I found that got him talking. In reality, it is better to discuss a seemingly superficial topic (like surfing) in an effort to ignite conversation than to struggle through traditional therapy topics but then lose the client. Once again, as we learned in the earlier section on “Taking Time to Engage” if I had come at Tim with a lot of questions about his feelings, or pressed him with specific assessment questions about his substance use or his behaviors, or tried to force feed him unwanted substance abuse or mental health education, it was quite evident that he would have shut me down just as he had the many counselors before me. Surfing was right where Tim’s values were centered so that was a great place to start for engagement. Of course as we also learned earlier, with time, as rapport is built other subjects could be worked in such as finding out if Tim ever enjoys surfing without getting high or if he is actually dependent on getting high to really excel at surfing. Either scenario is useful information and is more to work with in future sessions. The main point is that with more resistant types of clients like Tim, **taking time to engage** and doing some **fishing for values** is a key combination of engagement skills for establishing a relationship where there initially may be very little at hand to work with. *(If you remember, this story is very similar to the story of Mickey in Chapter 4, [Take Time to Engage](#). This again emphasizes the importance of taking time to engage but also at more challenging times combining the tool, **fishing for values**)*

So what exactly does fishing for values entail, and what does the counselor need to know? When reflective listening and empathy alone are not enough it is important to train yourself to be able to generate and ask interesting yet nonthreatening questions. There is a delicate balance to the types of questions that should be utilized in the “fishing” process. For example, if questions seem too intrusive or if the question-asking process begins to resemble an overly-invasive investigation then the fishing process can be ineffective. Consider some key points when fishing for values:

Remain Attentive to Physical Cues – Notice what your client is wearing. Are they wearing a shirt with a band’s name on it, or a sports logo? The client may literally be broadcasting their values (music, sports, etc.) as a message on their clothing or other apparel. Tattoos, jewelry and hair styles can also reveal a client’s values, provided you are prepared to ask about these things in a nonjudgmental manner, particularly when something may invoke a negative reaction from traditional authority figures such as police, parents, teachers, etc. Again, when commenting on someone’s appearance it is important to be respectful, tactful and sincere.





Remain attentive to behavior and verbal cues – For example, if a client coming in for intake is muttering something under his or her breath about the frustrating paperwork, it can be helpful to take the time to validate that frustration out loud by saying something such as “Man, that is a lot of paperwork to have to do so early in the morning, would you like some help?” Another example would be to say directly to an angry adolescent who is sighing and acting irritable, “I get the sense you aren’t too thrilled to be here”. Starting from a genuine candid and honest standpoint in this manner can effectively open up conversation.

Have a set of “Go to” questions that work. In substance abuse counseling in particular, it can be highly effective to ask a resistant client questions that he or she may not have been expecting. For example, consider a tough client brought to you after he was arrested for having an ounce of marijuana. In situation when faced with this client who is acting resistant to talking, a question like “So the police took your weed...What’s an ounce going for nowadays (price)? Or another example could be: “So, was it good weed?” These questions may seem counter-intuitive for a drug counselor to ask, especially when the eventual long term goal happens to be helping the client to stop smoking weed. But, from an engagement perspective, getting the resistant client talking takes precedence in order to then begin working toward long term goals later. Often, when we have newer and more resistant clients, their values initially surround their drug use so when fishing for values, it is important to start where our client is at, even if that involves an open discussion of negative behaviors which the client may glorify, such as drug use. Getting our clients to open up is often the takeoff point for progress later down the line.

Remain in tune to cues of interest: When fishing for values, the therapist often needs to rotate through a host of subjects (fishing) in an effort to strike an interest with the client’s values (get a proverbial “bite”) How does the counselor know when the client is “taking the bait”? The obvious answer would be when the client starts talking at greater length than the one-word answers he or she may have been giving earlier in the session. Also however, when it is not so obvious, attention to subtle cues such as a small crack of a smile or repositioning body language can indicate we have caught the client’s interest by hitting on a topic of value to that client. Also, never forget the benefit and effectiveness of being attuned to the client’s eyes. Even the slightest widening of our resistant clients eyes can indicate the doorway is opening on a topic of value to the client.

Finally, once fishing for values has worked and some discussion of values is taking place it is critical for the clinician to utilize a tool to be discussed later: [Taking an Interest](#), (Tool#9 which is covered later). For now however, to discuss values further, let’s review the key role that *values* play in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

NEXT READ: [Values and CBT](#)