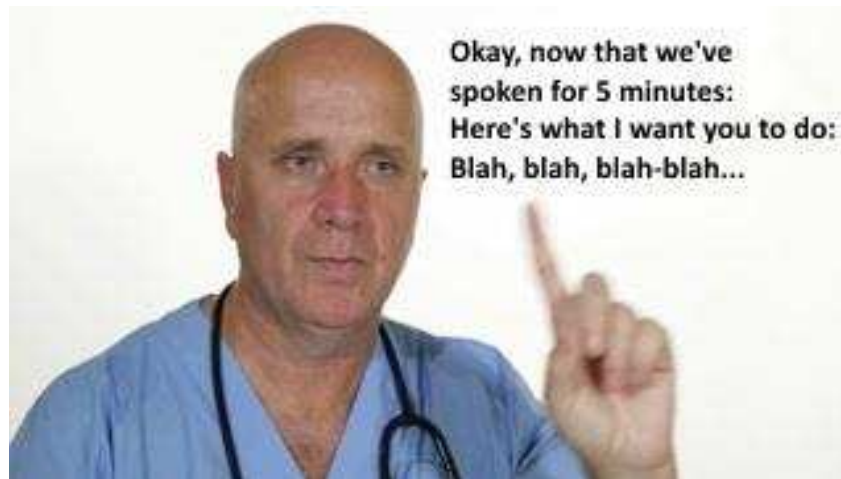


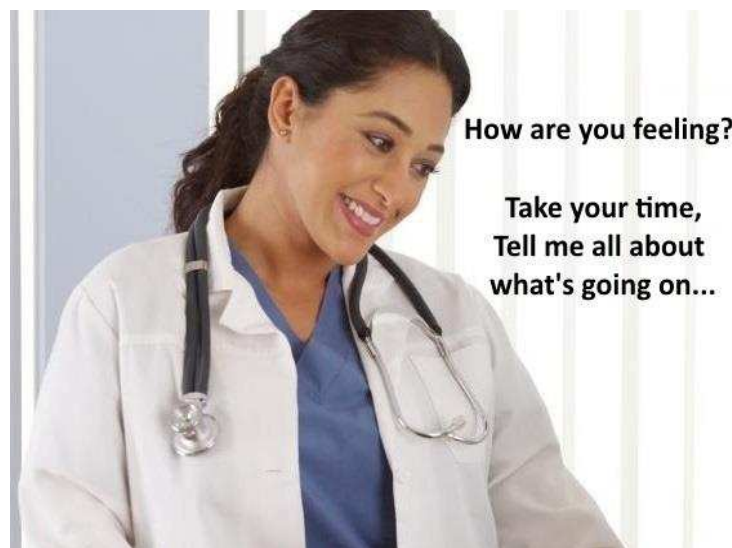


Engagement Tool #1 - Take Time to Engage

Imagine if you went to go see a new doctor because you just found out that you might have some kind of medical problem. Right away when you first meet him you find him to be cold, humorless, and aloof. Since you are already there suppose you then proceeded to tell him about your problem and symptoms and right away he starts pontificating about his expertise on your condition, which is quickly followed by a lengthy list of lifestyle changes, exercises, dietary restrictions and medications he demands you to start with immediately. How do you think you would feel after you left that office? It is pretty safe to say you would feel quite overwhelmed and even annoyed. As a result, depending upon how serious you believed your medical problem to be, you may decide to not to even go back to see that doctor again.



Now suppose that the same doctor had taken a little time to get to know you as a person. Suppose the doctor took the time to be friendly and nice and when he listened to your symptoms and he took a little extra time to talk to you about your own unique circumstances instead of right away assigning you a diagnosis or labeled disorder. What if the doctor started you off with just a few practical suggestions to get started on your recovery, while just outlining the overall process instead of overwhelming you with a ton of confusing information and terminology that is way over your head? Obviously, the second description of the doctor likely sounds much more inviting. Most people would agree that they would be more inclined to go back and see the doctor for additional visits based on this second description. That is because in the second description, the doctor took the *time for engagement*





The same principles described above are even more relevant and true when it comes to counseling, particularly in the substance abuse and mental health fields. It is essential that counselors make time and then take time for engagement, even with mandated clients who have little choice but to comply. One of the most important factors for successful treatment is the counselor-client relationship. As counselors, we never want to overwhelm our clients with too much information too fast. We do not want to overload our clients with expectations and suggestions for lifestyle changes that they just are not ready for. We do not want to insist that we are the expert and therefore the client's primary responsibility is to just shut up, listen, and comply. Recovery and positive change is a process and not an event. People change at their own pace and in order to foster growth it is critical that we must respect that. Getting started in the process of recovery and change is not easy for those we help, therefore it is important to engage those we help to embrace this process in a collaborative and trusting manner. However, this takes time, thus leading back to the importance of *taking time for engagement*. To illustrate consider the case of Mickey:

Mickey is a teenager whose parents caught him smoking marijuana and drinking on several occasions. Mickey's parents had always been on the permissive side and as a result there were very few consequences for Mickey's marijuana and alcohol use for most of his teenage years. Mickey was never really a good student but he did enough to get by. For the first time ever, Mickey reached a point where he was in jeopardy of staying back and he told his parents that he was considering dropping out of High School. Mickey's parents saw a gradual increase in Mickey's marijuana and alcohol use which they started to view as a contributing factor in Mickey's decrease in both school performance and attendance. Mickey's parents brought their son reluctantly to outpatient therapy to start addressing his marijuana and alcohol use. As expected Mickey did not see a problem and he openly admitted he did not want treatment at all and he was only attending therapy because his parents were taking his phone away until he came to treatment. Mickey's counselor agreed to see Mickey for outpatient individual therapy with family participation. The counselor brought Mickey's parents in for the first part of session to address their concerns then saved a large portion of the latter part of the session to meet alone with Mickey.

After about three weeks, Mickey's parents approached the counselor alone at the end of a session to report the following: "Mickey says he actually likes coming to talk to you, but when we asked him what you guys are talking about he said that all you guys are discussing is music and skateboarding, how can that be helping him?"

How would you answer the parent's question? This can be a common scenario especially with young people who are coerced into treatment. Often, kids forced into treatment by their parents will try to convince their parents that somehow the sessions are a superficial waste of time. Suppose the counselor really was primarily only talking about skateboarding and music with the Mickey? Suppose that is all that Mickey was willing to talk about? Is it true that the sessions are a superficial waste of time? Consider the counselor's response below:

The counselor, who was practicing the Escalator method of insight and motivation driven treatment, valued the importance of the principle; *Take time for engagement*. The counselor responded to the parents by confessing that it is true that a lot of discussion in the sessions had been about music and skateboarding. The counselor explained to the parents the importance of taking time to engage the client. If the counselor started right in with a lot of serious drug and alcohol education, Mickey, who was already resistant, would likely have been even more resistant to therapy. Rather by taking the time to engage Mickey by discussing subjects that he wanted to speak about, a relationship was built



and Mickey then was coming back and opening up. Then once open conversation was started, the counselor was able to subtly working substance abuse into the sessions. For example, the counselor was able to get Mickey to self-report how he used to be one of the best skateboarders in the area but he stopped skating since he has been smoking more and more weed. Mickey also acknowledged that if he was going to try to stop smoking weed to get his parents off of his back, he could consider getting back into skateboarding as a drug free hobby. In addition, Mickey also eventually self-reported that if he could show his parents he was no longer using drugs and alcohol, maybe they would consider buying him the new guitar he was looking at as he really loves music and the one thing that he did like about school was his elective music theory class. Once the parents heard the rationale for the counselor taking time for engagement it all made sense to them why these seemingly superficial subjects were discussed at the start. The time spent on seemingly unimportant conversation (skateboarding and music) really was valuable as engagement increased thus opening up doors for addressing the substance use issues over time. Taking time to engage is critical so really it is almost never a waste of time.

The same principle holds true in this case as in almost all others. When working with someone who does not want to be there (which is quite common) *if there is no engagement, then there is no treatment*. It is essential that counselors take the extra time to get people to want to come back. Therapy should on some level be enjoyable and taking the time to engage essential in this process.

***Often the general rule when working with resistant clients is:
No engagement = No treatment.***

Therefore, Take Time to Engage



A lot of counselors reading this by now may have said to themselves “Oh I already do this” or perhaps reasoned: “This is basic Counseling 101 stuff”. To the contrary, as an experienced supervisor, I cannot emphasize how often counselors forget the importance of engagement. The value of taking the time for effective engagement cannot be overstated. For some counselors, engagement comes a bit more naturally but for others they may have to work at it. Whether or not you may be good at it or not, you can get better. What is important that you allot the time and show the patience needed for the engagement process to take place.



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