



What is Engagement?

Opening Exercise – Thinking about engagement in your life to gain perspective:

Answer the following questions and think about your answers so that you can increase your awareness about engagement in your own life:

- Take a few minutes to think about someone who was successful at engaging your past. For example, it could be a teacher, coach, parent, mentor, aunt/uncle, etc. Think about why that person was engaging to you. What was it about that person and the way he or she dealt with you, and communicated with you that drew you in to listen and take interest? What was it about their personality and overall approach that helped you make a connection? What was inspiring about that person?
- Think about your life today and consider engagement in a broader sense:
 - What is engaging to you now?
 - What gets you to stop and pay attention, listen and take interest?
 - What about other people helps motivate you?

Engagement is Everything

Did you ever meet (or work with) a counselor with experience, perhaps a few degrees and some letters after their name, that should theoretically be an “expert” counselor but whose clients couldn’t stand him (or her)? I have, multiple times. At the other end of the spectrum, I have met many inexperienced counseling or social work students in training who are extremely well-received by their clients. The general rule in the counseling field as in other fields is that education and training is helpful but there is definitely a special something that clients are drawn too that some counselors seem to have more than others regardless of their education, training and experience. Knowledge, experience and degrees does not automatically make one and engaging counselor. There is more too engagement than that.

There are many comparisons to this phenomenon in which some people seem to have an ability that transcends education and experience. Consider the field of auto mechanics, for example: There are individuals who have been working on cars for years who have had special trainings and certifications in all types of mechanical skills. There are others, who have had no education and are new to the field who just seem to have a knack for fixing cars better than their peers. Often, that type of skill is referred to as being “mechanically inclined”. Mechanically inclined people seem to just have a natural ability to understand, diagnose and repair machinery. These gifted individuals have that special something that just makes them good at what they do.

In the counseling field we aren’t working with machines but rather we do a “people” work. Some people possess talents with regard to getting people to trust them and to open up and feel comfortable in a counseling setting. Similar to the mechanically inclined mechanic, this person is a “natural” when it comes to working with people in a therapeutic environment and they have that “special something” that we have been discussing. That special something that some people have that supersedes their education and experience directly involves that person’s engagement skills.



Engagement skills are one of the most critical aspects of being a good counselor. Consider what **engagement** (the act of engaging) entails:

Engage – v – to occupy the attention or efforts of a person (or persons) – to attract, to involve, to engross

A counselor with the ability to engage the people he or she works with is able to draw people in and gain their attention. With engagement skills there is an ability to attract others to want to both talk to and listen to you. In counseling, this ability to attract others is different than trying to attract someone romantically or sexually, of course, which in counseling is not only ineffective but highly unethical. Rather, when a counselor who is skilled in engagement meets and works with a client or a group of clients, there is an effort made to attract others to want to trust us to open up about themselves and also to respect what we may have to say in return. When counselor can engage clients effectively, it is evident in that he or she can get them talking, sharing, trusting and opening up. Engagement increases comfort and involvement and decreases anxiety and defensiveness. When one can engage effectively, clients want to come back for more sessions because they feel “drawn in” to the therapeutic environment.

The reason for emphasizing engagement as a critical counseling skill is because quite often when it comes down to it, **when there is no engagement, there is no therapy**. The techniques, skills and overall approach the counselor may be bringing to the sessions really is irrelevant if there is not some ability to engage the client to participate in the therapy process itself. The same is true for groups. If people in a group are not drawn to the group facilitator’s ability to make each person in the group feel comfortable enough to open up, then the group can become weighed down by resistance and defensiveness and at times steeped in boredom. Particularly when working with resistant, defensive or defiant clients which is commonplace in the substance abuse field, engagement becomes an even more important factor for successful treatment. This is even truer when working with young people and adolescents. Engagement is critical for success.

The Tightrope



Being a substance abuse counselor is no easy job. Most would agree. Sometimes, as clinicians working with challenging clients in various forms of therapy, our mission to engage our clients can be likened to cautiously walking a tightrope. Consider the following diagram which illustrates opposing qualities that are important for counselors which often require a degree of balance to avoid leaning too much toward one side, while neglecting to accomplish the other. To be effective, we need to instinctively know when to lean toward either side of the spectrum:



As counselors we often walk a tightrope between different types of positive qualities:

We strive to be.....

- Flexible _____
- Fun and Relaxed _____
- Entertaining _____
- Humorous and Amusing _____
- Candid and Straightforward _____
- Spontaneous and Instinctive _____
- Caring and Compassionate _____
- Non-Judgmental _____

While also remembering to be....

- Firm – Upholding the rules
- Structured and Orderly
- Educational
- Serious and Safe
- Tactful and Practical
- Prepared and Predictable
- Consistent with Consequences
- Discerning and Alert (Not Naïve)

As shown here, there can be a delicate balance required when it comes to effectively engaging and maintaining the attention of our clients while upholding structure and accountability. In the counseling field we are trained in developing clinical skills, understanding theoretical frameworks and establishing a strong knowledge base, all of which has value in our therapeutic practice. However, when it comes to the key process of engagement, learning to demonstrate the right attitude and personality traits to occupy our client's attention and encourage their active participation comes to the fore. In developing these engaging traits it can be useful to look beyond theory and knowledge and consider those individuals in our lives and in our society who have exemplified what it means to be engaging. Examine some of the following examples below of individuals often found to be engaging:

- Your favorite teacher or mentor
- A news anchor or other broadcast announcer
- Actors and comedians
- Talk show and game show hosts
- Innovative and creative people (Such as Walt Disney)
- Charismatic individuals in leadership roles (Gandhi, for example)

This list goes on. We can learn a lot from people who know how to persuade, fascinate, captivate, entertain, attract, and enchant an audience. When we are acting in the role of counselor whether in individual, group, or family therapy our clients look beyond simply considering our knowledge, experience and expertise. Often the way we are able to connect with our client "audience" is critical to the insight and motivation building process which is at the foundation of the change process in treatment.

Engaging the "Un-engage-able"

Remember the opening exercise of this book when you were asked to think about a client who was difficult to work with? Once again consider that client or another challenging client that comes to mind and remember to specifically think about:

- The person's *attitude*



- Any difficult *circumstances*
- Things about this person that may have “gotten under your skin” or irritated you
- Ways that perhaps you had difficulty relating, identifying, understanding
- Limitations with regard to resources available
- Other obstacles that may have gotten in the way

It can be helpful to think about these clients that challenge us because these are usually the ones who make us better counselors in the end. In fact, if you ask most counselor's to tell you about a case that they feel that they did well with, the person almost always tells you about a client that they liked or related too. In reality, helping a client that you like or connected with is a good thing, however when I am assessing the skill level of another counselor, I want to hear about someone that they helped who they didn't like. I want to hear about how the counselor was able to connect with someone where there was little in common to connect with. I am impressed when someone successfully engages someone who was very difficult to connect with.

“We are counselors, helpers and social workers so we love all of our clients equally!” one may exclaim. That may sound very nice, but in reality, even though we are counselors, helpers, and social workers with the best intentions, we are also human beings first. Part of our human nature is that we connect with some types of people easier than others and we are prone to enjoy working with some individuals more than others. That does not mean that those in helping positions should treat people that they like with favoritism. To the contrary, it is our duty to help all that we may be assigned to help in our careers as counselors, regardless of our innermost feelings and preferences, with equality and respect. It is our ethical duty to be impartial and fair to all those who we treat. Nevertheless, the point being made here is that at times it may be easier to form the therapeutic bond with certain types of people where it may feel “natural” based on our personal inclinations toward certain personality types. However, at times in our effort to be impartial and fair to all people we work with, it may require more effort to engage some people than others. In the most basic of terms, it is often easier to help clients we like, however when we feel negatively toward someone, that may require enhanced effort on our end to successfully engage that person.

For example, just about any counselor could improve their outcomes as a clinician by “cherry picking” clients that are comfortable to work with and quick to respond to our methods. In such a situation, less desirable clients are quick to be discharged and labeled as “resistant” or “not ready”. If one only helps those clients whom they choose to work with based on preference that would be akin to school teacher only making an extra effort for the students that he or she likes, while allowing those more challenging and frustrating students to simply be left on their own to fail. Sadly, in our life experiences, many of us may have known a teacher who fit that selective description. Hopefully fewer counselors have had the experience of working with other counselors or agencies that “cherry pick” their clientele. Another way to refer to this is the concept of “selective engagement” which implies the ability for one to be engaging only toward a certain type of person, but not others. “I only do well with kids from the inner city” or “Just fill my caseload with people who are employed and motivated because that is who I work best with” are both examples of *selective engagement*. Specializing with a particular group can be helpful but that should not be at the expense of casting off clients who do not fit our area of preference. Rather, in the field of addictions and mental health, similar to a doctor, or a minister, or any public servant, we must be “all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:22) regardless of our biases, preferences, leanings or inclinations

Working successfully with those clients with whom we may struggle internally with is simply a part of being an effective substance abuse counselor. In the field of addiction, more than most fields, we



work often with individuals who have done terrible things, at times to innocent victims. That is where our “nonjudgmental empathy” from the spirit of Motivational Interviewing, is critical not only to preach, but to practice. At times clinicians need to “leave our values at the door” so to speak and start where our clients are and build upward from there. The point is not to let go of our values, but oftentimes in the spirit of being empathetic, we must learn to transform ourselves to see our client’s world as he or she sees it, regardless of how dark that world may be. Later in this book, we will discuss at length the concept of “empathy without agreement” which involves learning to understand those individuals we work with, even when personally when we may completely disagree with their values, choices or actions. An example that most people can identify with would be working with someone who has somehow hurt or neglected children (which sadly is not uncommon in the addiction field). If we were to figuratively grasp hold of our personal values for the wellbeing of children and wield those values like a baseball bat and judgmentally beat our client over the head with our judgments, we would not be helping anyone. Rather, an effective counselor is able to take the time to non-judgmentally get into the client’s world, and try to understand what lead this person to point where a child was abused or neglected. Again, this understanding in no way implies agreement with our client’s behavior nor does it mean we condone or excuse their actions. Rather, in the therapeutic setting the engagement process often starts with being able to simply start with empathy and understanding even in situations we may personally find to be reprehensible. This is empathy in its most raw form because it can be easy to empathize when we relate personally to our client however the empathy process is drastically more challenging when our own values are being adversely triggered by another’s disagreeable behavior.

Once again, if after reading this, you still believe that you like all of your clients the same then perhaps you are better than most. Most counselors can explain the experience of looking down at their schedule for the day, and seeing names of people coming in for session that trigger enthusiasm and optimism and others that trigger stress and uneasiness. The trick when it comes forming an effective therapeutic bond with all comers, is to learn to effectively engage clients who we do not like, with the same degree of skill as those we form a more natural bond with. The self-centered, rude, client on our caseload that stresses us out and rubs us the wrong way should feel no less connected with us as the pleasant easy going client who politely takes all of our suggestions. Through our development of engagement skills we can set the stage to work effectively with all of our clients; the nice and the not so nice, just the same.

The Existence of Resistance

In Motivational Interviewing, when describing unmotivated and challenging clients, a key concept is to view these challenges in terms of “ambivalence” to change rather than referring to a client as “resistant”. In the Escalator approach the concept of ambivalence is accepted however at the same time, the concept of *resistance* is real and should not be ignored.

Ambivalence: uncertainty or fluctuation, especially when caused by inability to make a choice or by a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite or conflicting things

This concept of ambivalence implies that clients often struggle with conflicting desires to either change or not change a behavior. Ambivalence is a strengths-based concept that drives the therapist and client to look toward any internal hope our clients may have for changing for good. This is positive and makes good sense.



However, when it comes to client behavior, resistance also rears its ugly head in various forms of therapy so as clinicians we need to be prepared for resistance as well:

Resist: 1. to withstand, strive against, oppose. 2. To withstand the action or effect of. 3. To stand firm against, to not yield to, fight against

Perhaps a way to view resistance is to look at it as “ambivalence on steroids” or even better: “ambivalence in action”. Although ambivalence is a more hopeful and positive way to frame the struggle faced by some of our clients in treatment, it cannot be denied that from time to time we will all face outright resistance in therapy settings. Anyone who has worked with adolescents surely will attest to this fact that at times their attitude and behavior is in direct opposition to our counseling efforts. The truth is that *resistance is real*.



Whatever we are faced with, whether it is ambivalence or direct resistance, our engagement tools as counselors are critical in helping our clients move toward insight, compliance, cooperation and motivation then toward inspiration and lasting change



This article is an excerpt from the 2017 Book:

“The Tools of Engagement: Taking the Escalator Counselor Handbook” [Available on Amazon](#)

www.takingtheescalator.com

