



## **Engagement: Sometimes the Counselor Must be an Entertainer:**

Interestingly, a counselor's job, to some degree is to be an entertainer, especially when running groups and working with resistance and definitely when working with children and adolescents. This viewpoint may seem provocative to some in the counseling field who believe that people come to counseling for therapy, not to be entertained. However, people have been saying something similar about teachers for decades. Most people can remember those teachers whom they liked, specifically when the teacher "made learning fun". The principle behind the counselor also being an entertainer is the same. When staffing a substance abuse treatment center, one of the qualities I would always look out for in each counselor is his or her ability to make substance abuse and mental health treatment as interesting and as enjoyable as possible. It is just not practical for substance abuse counselors to be dull or boring. It is also not effective. (However, I am sure there are boring people who will argue that point) The fact is that when providing treatment for those who abuse substances and who have coexisting emotional and behavioral issues, in today's world it is no longer an option just to rely on helping those who are motivated and insightful as we have discussed. It has been repeated throughout this book that if we only treat those who are motivated and insightful we are neglecting the vast majority of those who abuse substances to focus on just the handful of "easy" clients. The Escalator method is devoted to expanding the skill level of counselors and broadening the approach and perspective of the substance abuse field as a whole, in order to focus more help on the vast array of less motivated and less insightful people who really need it. Therefore, if we are going to embrace those who don't want help or don't think they need it, then we, as counselors when facing these more challenging individuals need to have the ability to "draw people in" to the overall process of changing for the better. For this to be effective, more often than not: counseling needs to be entertaining. What exactly does it mean to entertain?

**Entertain** v. - to hold the attention of pleasantly or agreeably. (Antonyms – bore, reject)



This definition applies directly to the need for counselors to know how to be entertainers when necessary. For some, the idea of being entertaining at first may seem like it implies "amusement", similar to the way a clown or a comedian entertains. Although a degree of amusement can be helpful,



the primary aspect of entertainment in counseling instead revolves much more around the counselor's ability to "hold the attention" of those we are helping in a much more meaningful way. To entertain, in this sense means that counselors not only must be knowledgeable and caring, but also interesting and invigorating to our audience. Being entertaining as a counselor can be a huge part of engagement because when done skillfully it stimulates our clients to stay with our programs a little longer to then learn a little bit more. A good comparison is to think about watching a show that fails to entertain or intrigue you in the first half, then there is a much less of a likelihood you will be inclined to stick around to watch it through to the end. Entertainment skills can increase the chance of getting our clients "absorbed" into the change process and thus keep on coming back for more.

Some people have a natural ability to fit right into the role of being both a counselor and an entertainer. Some individuals are naturally engaging with an ability to be warm and inviting as well as interesting and fun. There are those who are gifted speakers who have an aptitude for making just about anything sound interesting and exciting. If you however, are not one of those people who already have an ability to be entertaining, you need not worry because there are ways to develop and improve with this critical ability. Below are a few simple but extremely relevant, practical and achievable pointers for being an entertaining counselor:

**Preparation is critical** (Especially with group therapy) – When we are prepared to provide counseling for a particular individual or group, it is much easier to be entertaining and interesting. The old days running a group by sticking in an old video then having a brief discussion afterward and calling it counseling are over and have been for years (Substance abuse counselors who have been around for a while will understand that reference). There was a time years ago when the majority of our clientele was uninformed and naïve about substance abuse, addiction, mental health and recovery due to a lack of access to current information. The internet has changed that a great deal as information is right at everyone's fingertips on a daily basis. Therefore it can be a greater challenge for counselors today to provide something new and different for our clients. In addition, it seems like the farther back you go in time, the better people's attention span used to be. I often refer to today's generation as the "ADHD Generation" because so many people, including myself, have difficulty focusing and get bored so easily. Thus providing extremely basic education in therapy is usually no longer anything special or interesting. As counselors with the clients of today, especially in group therapy, we need to bring more to the table. Preparation is often quite necessary.





The same principle regarding the need to bring more to the table applies to counselors who basically want to run their group sessions like just another continuous AA meeting week after week. The ADHD Generation often struggles with long bouts of unceasing processing without the counselor bringing something new and interesting into the arena. In addition, if you are required to run 3 hour sessions based on an IOP (Intensive Outpatient Program) model, then you will soon find out that getting people to sit in a room and just talk for three hours is can be an extremely challenging task with resistant clients. By comparison, how many people today can even tolerate going to the movie theater for a three hour movie these days? Personally, I know it is a struggle for me to sit still and focus on doing *anything* for 3 hours without something there to keep me engaged and entertained. The prevalence of coexisting mental health issues with our clients, including issues such as depression, mood disorders, and anxiety, which often have poor concentration as a prevalent symptom, only contributes to this challenge.

So, more often than not, to consistently be an effective counselor in today's world, when working with more challenging clients in treatment sooner or later we may be requires to step up our efforts with regard to preparation. It is important that counselors running groups have activities that are interesting, thought provoking, and mentally stimulating on some level. Additionally, when preparing, our activities and other materials selected should coincide with the overall motivational and insight level of the individual or group we are working with. Rather than simply following a predetermined curriculum, an effective, entertaining counselor selects his or her group materials with each new session, based on the current needs of the clients for that day. The Escalator method is founded on the concept of matching interventions and preparing activities based on the apparent needs and motivation and insight levels of those we are trying to help. When preparing then, to keep our clients engaged, the concept of "finding the right tool for the right job" is essential. Counselors using the Escalator method use the many tools in the Escalator tool sharing database that are designed to coincide with our clients various levels of motivation and insight.



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Further, when running groups, it is always important to prepare for the "bomb" factor, which I also like to refer as the "crickets" syndrome. Almost every counselor has experienced the situation when you prepare something for a group, thinking it is going to generate a lot of discussion only to find out it "bombs" and gets minimal response. (Another example would be trying to introduce a seemingly interesting topic for discussion to the group only to be confronted by an awkward silence with proverbial "crickets" chirping to emphasize the silence). Due to the potential that our ideas don't always go as planned it is not only good to be prepared, but with more challenging groups of clients it may be even better to *over-prepare* to compensate if an activity "bombs" For example, if you know ahead of time that you have 3 hours of counseling to do with a group that can be tough to engage, it is wise to prepare 4 hours' worth of material. If you are running a shorter 60 to 90 minute group that one activity will cover, it is wise to always have a backup on hand in case one bombs. Preparation will most assuredly contribute greatly to your ability to not only be a good counselor, but to be an entertainer by keeping your clients interested and engaged. Preparation leads us to the next point about being a more entertaining counselor – Be Creative

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**Creativity** – Some people are blessed of the gift of being creative more than others. If you are one of those people who already have an aptitude for being creative then you should be using this asset in your work with the substance abuse and mental health population. Even if you are not naturally creative on your own, you can still try to take advantage of people who you work with who are creative. You can also concentrate on thinking “outside the box” to come up with new ways to help those you are working with. Whether or not creativity is easy or challenging in your case, you owe it to the people you are trying to help to try some creative methods when standard methods aren’t cutting the mustard and generating an interest among your clients. If being creative does not come naturally to you then the paragraphs to follow outline some basic ways to start thinking in terms of creativity (especially in group therapy settings)

Start by asking yourself introspectively: “How can I get people talking and opening up in a non-threatening way?” Then brainstorm as many clever ways you can think of. Get your team of coworkers involved if you can. The suggestions following this one offer some ideas:

- Especially for groups, can you present your topic in the form of a game? For some reason, when a discussion topic is introduced in the form of a game, people are more at ease and then more inclined to open up. For example, after providing information on the sensitive topic of Shame and Guilt, instead of trying to facilitate a discussion on these topics, I formulated some thought provoking questions and arranged them in the form of a game entitled “The Shame Game” That simple switch to a game format always increases the level of participation in group therapy. Can you utilize existing known entertainment formats for introducing information? For example, instead of lecturing, another way to present educational material with difficult substance abuse or mental health groups would be to implement a game based format of “Recovery Jeopardy” or perhaps the similar premise behind another game or well-known TV show. The same information from a lecture, repackaged and redistributed in a more “fun” format can make a huge difference in our client’s level of engagement as it often lowers the threat level and increases comfort.
- Can you use current events and interesting news items as a means to generate discussion? The internet is a daily source of information that can generate excellent discussion. In thinking outside the box, keep mind that the news items you bring to therapy do not have to be directly substance abuse or mental health related to generate discussion. Rather, a lot of what is in the news about entertainment, sports, world events, and many other stories can be discussed at face value initially then cleverly transitioned to generate more relevant group discussion on addiction and mental health.
- Think of ways to use the group itself as a source of creativity. Some of the best group exercises require group members to think of questions for one another and to come up with new ideas to generate interesting relevant discussion. Many of us as counselors were drawn to this field because of how entertaining our clients can be. It therefore makes sense to utilize our client’s natural abilities to generate creative ideas and unique discussions.
- Consider how you can emphasize your own strengths and talents as well as the strengths and talents of your coworkers and others willing to help. Are you good at art? Music? Do you have a hobby or an area of knowledge that you can incorporate into therapy? Use what you have as well as what you’re setting may have available. For example, I had a volunteer who was a personal trainer so we incorporated an exercise program into our IOP which clients loved. On another occasion we used an intern with training in health and nutrition to use those specialized



skills with our groups. There are many counselors, interns and volunteers with special knowledge and training in a variety of unique areas who are very willing to share some of their time or expertise to incorporate different approaches to groups with great success.

One of the best things about being creative is that when you find something that works you can keep going back to use it again in the future. Your clients will appreciate your efforts to give them something above and beyond the same old thing which some of them have heard a dozen times already in past programs. Being creative likely will also help you enjoy your job as a counselor even more as well.

**Have a Sense of Humor** – Similar to what is involved with in the previous section on creativity, having a sense of humor comes naturally to some but not to others. If you do have a sense of humor then you probably already know the value of that gift when it comes to engagement. Nothing is more stimulating and entertaining than a good sense of humor. This applies to both group and individual therapy. An occasional laugh in session goes a long way with regard to getting even some of the most challenging clients to come back. Humor puts people at ease and it is a catalyst with regard to speeding up the rate at which a client and counselor form a therapeutic bond. A funny but appropriate story is a great tool to open up a difficult conversation. If you have the ability to use humor appropriately, then by all means do so. Some counselors fear that humor will hurt the therapeutic relationship by undermining the seriousness of the interaction between counselor and client. Although there are definitely times where remaining serious is important, overall, well-placed moments of humor in an individual or group session does wonders for the overall relationship. People love to laugh and it makes them feel comfortable. Think of your own current and past relationships with teachers, doctors, and other professionals. Surely you felt more at ease when someone had a sense of humor as opposed to being stiff, rigid or impersonal. It is the same with people's relationships with their counselor.

If you do not have a good sense of humor you still can take advantage of this skill area. Your clients are often very funny. It can be just as effective to allow your clients to express themselves in a humorous way at appropriate times in the individual or group session. As a counselor your job can be to guide the conversation so that no one is insulted while otherwise allowing appropriate humorous expression in the session. This can be very effective, engaging and entertaining even if you are not the one using your own sense of humor.

When used appropriately, humor can break down barriers and circumvent even complex obstacles. If you are going to use humor it is important to develop an understanding of the following parameters of humor in treatment.

- Understand the balance between being risk-taking and being inappropriate – Humor is closely linked with risk taking because every time we try to make someone laugh, we are taking a risk that effort may fail. On an even more serious level, if we are not careful, a poorly chosen joke or other humorous-sounding comment may even insult our client. Any comedian can tell you that no joke is fool proof as it is important to be sensitive to timing, audience and circumstances. A line that is funny today with one client can be offensive in another setting. A good example could be the way someone jokes with a room full of adolescents would likely be different than with a group of elderly clients. When you are on the fence about making a humorous comment, it may be safer to follow the old adage “when in doubt, leave it out”. If you are more of a risk-taker with humor then be prepared to apologize in case you unexpectedly rub someone the wrong way. Also, know your “no fly zones” with regard to areas you should never joke about including any humor that is insensitive





to one's culture, race, sexual orientation, religion or ethnicity or any other potentially sensitive or deeply personal area. Remember that once an offensive line is out of your mouth, there is no taking it back even if it was unintentional or simply unthoughtful with no ill intent.

- Learn the balance between encouraging humor in sessions but maintaining control – If you are going to introduce humor into a session, particularly a group, if you are not careful it can catch on like wildfire and actually get out of control. There are times to keep things serious and there are times when introducing a little humor is advantageous. You don't want a group therapy session to spiral into chaos because you let the joking go too far. It is important to be able to reign things in.
- You may elect to carefully use personal experience to your advantage dependent upon your comfort level and the overall appropriateness of the story. A funny but appropriate personal story can be a great tool to open up an otherwise strained conversation.

If you have a good sense of humor and you develop your skill in using it, then you have something you can use over and over. One can reuse comical “material” and anecdotes and “one-liners” over and over with new clients. Nevertheless, for those of us who just do not feel skilled at using humor, have no fear, one does not have to be funny in order to successfully engage difficult clients. Still, simply being open to adapting to humorous situations even if this does not come natural to you is something to keep on your radar as a counselor because anyone can improve with time and practice.

**Learn to be flexible between knowing when to take the lead and when to sit back, listen, support and observe:** There is something to be said about the value of a counselor running a group so effectively that the “group runs itself”. In that case, the counselor can just sit back and allow the group members to help one another while taking a more passive role as facilitator and guide as opposed to needing to actively direct the flow of the conversation. That type of situation is beneficial however there is one catch: Often, a group “running itself” is more of an ideal situation usually only achieved with the presence of several motivated and insightful group members setting a positive example for the less motivated minority. The Escalator is about working with situations that are not ideal. In reality and in practice in the substance abuse and mental health field today, we are so often faced with situations that are far less than ideal. Therefore, it is important to be flexible enough to know when to step back when group is self-sufficiently flowing on its own while also being attuned to those times when you need to step in and actively guide things along from a leadership role, often carefully fluctuating between the two.





Looking back at your days in high school, can you remember that kid in your class who was an expert at constantly driving the teacher absolutely nuts? (Usually known as the teachers nightmare) Now imagine a whole room full of those kids on drugs. That often is a description of a lot of adolescent substance abuse groups which can be a real challenge indeed. Unfortunately, adult substance abuse groups may not much better in many settings particularly when the clientele is less insightful and unmotivated. When faced with these types of situations, the thought of taking a back seat and allowing the group to “run itself” may be a less realistic expectation on most days. When faced with less motivated and insightful clients, it is often necessary that the counselor take a more active role in “steering” the group. Therefore, with less motivated/insightful groups, the counselor really needs to be prepared to be in the proverbial “driver’s seat”. The same is true with individual therapy. When faced with an angry person sitting across from you, forced to be there, perhaps just giving you one-word answers in between periods of acting completely disinterested, just sitting back and counting on reflective listening and empathetic responses often does not cut it, as we discussed in Chapter 1. Personally speaking, I cannot count the times that an angry, resistant client, usually and adolescent, has complained to me that they could not stand working with their previous therapist because he or she would ask a few questions then allow for awkward silences. In graduate school the use of silence is often taught as a counseling tool however with more resistant clients, particularly adolescents, that approach has risks as clients who are already uncomfortable about attending treatment may not be able to tolerate extended silences in therapy. There is a time and place to effectively use silence but that is almost always something you would not want to consider unless you have a solid rapport with your client and there is an established comfort level in treatment. Early in the engagement process as a general rule, silence as a tool is to be avoided. Overall, to summarize this entire section, the primary skill building area involved is to develop your instincts a counselor with regard to recognizing the degree to which you need to be more proactive and when to allow things to flow more naturally in all of your counseling sessions. Often there can be a direct correlation between the amount of counselor direct involvement in session and client insight and motivation levels:

**So, particularly in situations where client motivation and insight is lacking, whether in group or individual therapy, the counselor often needs to step up and take a more active role in the therapeutic process for therapy to be entertaining, interesting and engaging.**

*Here are some basic but practical tips for learning to do this effectively (particularly for less experienced counselors but also a good self-review for anyone):*

>*If you are shy you have to learn to fight through it* -There is little room for shyness in the counseling field when working with people who don’t want to be in counseling. I am not saying that people who are naturally shy cannot be good counselors, however, if you are going to work with the more challenging clients in this field, it is helpful and often necessary to overcome shyness. I myself was a very shy person when I first started but I learned to grow past it. The best way to get past shyness is to push yourself with new challenges. Acknowledge your fears and insecurities as a counselor and face them. Go outside your comfort zone with people who make you a bit anxious or with those who you have little if anything you have in common with. Remember this one principle about shyness and anxiety: You can still be anxious and shy on the inside while fighting not to show it on the outside which is a normal phenomenon. Some of the most confidence-looking speakers are often anxious on the inside but simply have developed their own coping skills to actively work through it.

>*Learn to be a Talk Show Host* – When training a counselor who is going to work with difficult clients, I tell them that if someone were to walk in to a session, they should instantly be able to identify who the counselor is. When a group is resistant, unmotivated, etc. it is important that the counselor be a



source of energy and momentum for the group or individual session. A good model to emulate when running a difficult group may at times need to resemble a talk show host who brings some charm and charisma into the situation, especially when it is lacking among the clients. If the group is not giving you much to work with it can be helpful to get up and move around to generate some positive energy.



>Group is not a series of individual sessions with other people watching each other – Almost every experienced counselor who just read that line knows what I am talking about. Group should not be an endless and monotonous “check in” where members take turns one by one reviewing what is going on in their life while everyone else quietly listens and waits their turn (usually bored out of their minds). Group needs to be interactive and flexible. When group is challenging, one of the best ways to do this is to simply keep things moving by initially working toward keeping client self-expressions shorter to allow more interplay between members as opposed to allowing one member to dominate for long periods. As group progresses and becomes more interactive the counselor can loosen the reins and allow more natural flow between members. It is a critical skill to learn how to politely cut someone off who may be monopolizing the group to its detriment. Starting group by expressing the importance of “sharing the time” is a good place to start. Then when someone is going on for too long you can politely remind them of that rule. Another strategy when someone is going on for too long is to wait look at someone else in the group and redirect the conversation to them by saying, “hold on (to the person talking), what do you think about what he just said (putting conversation on to new person)”



>Avoid criticism and “Calling Out”– Early on, when I first started and was trained in a more “addicts helping addicts” environment, the people with more clean time often felt the authority to give advice to the less experienced group members. As I gained more experience I consistently found two problems with this approach occurring over and over again:





- 1) Clients prone to giving a lot of advice in group are at times viewed as disingenuous by other group members. Most counselors have had the experience of listening to someone give out advice too freely in the group, then later finding out that person was getting high themselves and lying about the entire time – and quite often the group already knew it before you did!
- 2) One of the most common complaints that clients who are less motivated and insightful make about groups (and often about 12 Step programs) is they are not comfortable with advice giving and hypocrisy from others in the group. A group focused primarily on people constantly “calling each other out” can become a very unpleasant environment. People tend to be much better advice givers than they are, advice takers.

In no way am I saying that there never should be any sharing of feedback or advice in a group. Nor am I saying that group members should never openly address each other when contradictions arise. Feedback and open sharing of advice between group members is at the heart of what makes group so effective when compared to individual therapy. The point is that it is the counselor's job, when working with less motivated individuals, to make sure that feedback and advice are given in a non-confrontational manner and only when appropriate and welcomed by the receiver of the feedback. The overall “spirit” of the group when working with less motivated/insightful members needs to be non-judgmental, not overly critical, and based on more friendly “take it or leave it” feedback as opposed to allowing for a group an environment that encourages fault-finding between members and allowing the more experienced members to serve as “experts”. Sometimes it is all in the way the counselor phrases things. Consider an example:

COUNSELOR – “Hey Harry, you’ve been clean the longest in here, why don’t you tell Jimmy whose been struggling over here a little more about what you personally have been doing to stay clean, maybe it will help him”

If Jimmy doesn’t like or respect Harry, or worse yet, if Harry really isn’t clean and Jimmy knows it, then counselor is probably doing more harm than good with Harry’s advice. Consider a better way to handle the same situation:

COUNSELOR – “Hey Harry, so I you say you are doing well, that’s really great, what’s been working for you?”

The counselor may have the same goal of getting Harry who seems to be clean to give some advice to the group, particularly for Jimmy who seems to be struggling. However rather than turn Jimmy off by having Harry preach directly at him, the counselor is opening up the same information in a less threatening manner for Jimmy and for everyone involved. (Granted, if Harry really is still secretly using it will turn the group off, however still this second approach is more likely to minimize any negative reaction from the rest of the group.)

[Taken from “Tools of Engagement: Taking the Escalator Counselor Handbook”](#)

