



Engagement Tool: Illustrations and Analogies

One of the best teaching tools out there is use of word illustrations. It is so valuable to be able to explain things in terms that a wide variety of people can understand. A well thought out word illustration that is relevant and meaningful can help build empathy and understanding even with people who have not had personal experience with a certain subject area. This would include analogies, stories that have a moral or lesson attached, metaphors, or other “word pictures.” The point of an illustration is to teach a lesson in a more visual sense by getting the listener to imagine the content of the information then to derive relevant meaning from the story-picture. From a counseling perspective, effective illustrations can have significant benefits:

- Effective illustrations can bring a deeper, more personal, level of understanding to a challenging situation for the clients and families we work with
- Illustrations can clarify concepts that may otherwise be difficult to explain
- Illustrations that work well can be very practical and therefore used over and over again with a variety of clients
- From an insight and motivation building perspective, effective illustrations can often reach deeper into our client’s figurative “heart” than traditional communication
- When used effectively with our clients, good illustrations are often remembered and can be revisited and at times even built upon in future therapy sessions.

Some requirements for an illustration to be effective are:

- 1 **The illustration should not be not overly complicated or confusing** –If a lot of clarification or explanation is needed to convey an illustration then it probably isn’t effective. Good illustrations are usually expressed in terms that the listener can easily understand and envision. Using familiar concepts often works the best. For example, would it make sense to use a football illustration with someone who has no interest in sports? Would it be effective to use an illustration about social media with someone who is completely computer illiterate? In both cases, those illustrations would not work because of a lack of familiarity to the listener. Rather, the subject matter of the illustration should match the interests and awareness of the listener. Remember how important it is to “know your audience” whenever using illustrations. Whether that person or persons listening to you are your individual client, a couple, a family, a group or a classroom, tailor your illustrations to your audience. Simply put, speak in simple and familiar terms that your listener(s) will easily follow and understand
- 2 **The illustration closely matches the meaning of the thought or idea that is being conveyed** – If the listener walks away from your illustration scratching his or he heard thinking “what did that mean?” then the illustration clearly didn’t work. In other words, an illustration is only effective if it makes sense and the listener leaves the conversation with an increased sense of understanding and clarity. An illustration can backfire if it misses the mark with the intended lesson. Usually it is quite clear if the listener grasped your illustration by their reaction. If your audience seems confused, the illustration may need fine-tuned or to be scrapped altogether. If the audience seemed to show interest and display some degree of self-discovery then the illustration was a hit.



Some examples of illustrations, analogies and metaphors that may be effective:

Food Related Illustrations: *Hungry? Then You Too Can Begin to Understand Addiction*

One subject that just about every person in the world can understand is *food*. The following are some food-based word illustrations to help people understand some of the concepts behind substance use issues and what is involved in the change process.

The format below starts with a common question that may be asked by someone who is trying to deal with a substance use issue followed by the illustration used to explain the rationale behind the answer:

Client Question – “What is wrong with me continuing to hang out with my friends who still use drugs?”

Food Illustration Answer – Suppose an extremely overweight person who loved fried chicken was trying to lose weight. What would you say to that person if he hung out at the fast food joint and tried to just eat salads while his friends all pigged out and ate fried chicken at the table? How long do you think it would be before that person asked for a drumstick?

Question – “What could go wrong if I just stop using this drug and just switch to another drug instead?”

Food Answer – Suppose a woman loved chocolate ice cream and the doctor told her that she had to stop eating it due to serious health reasons. If this person’s plan was to switch to vanilla ice cream instead, what could happen? Eating vanilla may work for a while but eventually, isn’t it likely that on one of the trips to the ice cream store that sooner or later this person would say “forget it, give me some of my favorite: Chocolate!” That is what can happen when you switch drugs. Although nothing is guaranteed, many people do end up returning to their favorite





Other illustration examples:

A parent asks a substance abuse counselor: “Why can’t my kid just stop smoking weed and just give it up already?” – If the kid in this example is self-medicating then the counselor can try to describe to parents how asking kids to give up something like marijuana that is "working" for them in a sense to calm them down or allow them to escape is complicated and sometimes we can't just ask them to give up weed without giving them skills first. That would be like taking away a table leg and expecting the table not to collapse. We instead have to prop up the table with something else (coping skills and supports) so we can take that leg/weed away (Tatum.) A similar illustration can be read in the following brief blog entry (Click link below)

[Drowning in a Sea of Addiction](#)



The Relationship Illustration - Compare substance abuse to a bad relationship: If you had a friend who told you that her boyfriend beat her badly once per month but she does not leave him because the other 29 days of the month she feels are really good. That is similar to someone who is using substances and periodically gets in trouble over and over but keeps using because the days in between arrests and other consequences are fun. Does that make sense?

“Rat on the Wheel” - Many individuals who smoke a lot of marijuana often feel like they are enlightened more than the average person as marijuana gives them a deeper understanding of life. Often however, some of these daily marijuana users end up being big talkers but not such big doers. For people who fall into this category their “enlightened” thoughts may be more like a rat running on a wheel as it feels like their thinking is getting them somewhere but in the end they really went nowhere. Do you know anyone who fits this category? Racing thoughts that come about because of anxiety also can be described in terms of the rat on the wheel phenomenon

Motivation is Like Starting a Fire: A good analogy for motivation and insight building is to compare it with starting a fire from scratch. Keep in mind that just like starting a fire, getting the first few embers burning can be the hardest and most time consuming task as one may have to rub sticks together for hours just to get one tiny spark. Then, one must gently blow on the embers to get a small flame, carefully shielding the flame from any wind, while slowly adding just the right amount of fuel, but not so quickly so as to smother the fire. If done correctly, a sustained fire results. More hearty fuel like twigs then eventually sticks and then later on logs are then added to help build the flame to a roaring fire. Motivation and insight often start out like those newly lit embers which are carefully nurtured then established at the beginning of the change process. As one makes progress, activities and strategies that serve as motivational “fuel” need to be increasingly challenging, but not too



challenging, so as to increase insight and motivation gradually, steadily and gently to “fan the flames” so to speak. Once some flames of motivation and insight are burning independently in a person, he or she must learn how to keep on feeding the fire of motivation by occasionally adding fuel, and by doing more to be proactive in the change process. In this case, that would involve learning strategies that keep one actively motivated and self-aware and on the path toward long term inspiration and progress. *More on this topic by clicking link below:*

[Planning for Inspiration](#)

The Window of Insight - Insight and awareness is like a window that opens and closes, Consequences such as legal issues, employment problems, financial concerns, health problems, etc. often precede the opening of the “window” of insight as there is often an increased awareness that something is wrong immediately after a consequence. However, what can happen when time goes by after a consequence and nothing changes? Often that “window” of awareness can close and a person can lose the insight gained from the consequence.

Pulling Things out of the Garbage - We have all had the experience of cleaning out your home and having to throw things we own into the garbage in an effort to move forward in life. If something is truly a piece of garbage to us, then as we hold that thing over the trash pile we should have no problem letting it go and dropping it in. Nevertheless, we have all had that experience when we picked something up and then went to throw it out but just as we were about to let go of it some thought came into our mind that caused hesitation with regard to dropping it into the dumpster. Perhaps we started to think of the sentimental value of the object which and its connection to our fond memories. Perhaps we looked at what we are about to throw away and we may think there still is value for the object, causing us to hold on to thinking; “I may still need this one day, let me hold on for a little longer” Only when we truly believe that something is “garbage” in the sense that it no longer has any value or any meaning or any purpose in our life, then we can then truly throw it away and let it go with ease. If we can eventually think about our old negative behaviors as garbage, we will have no problem letting them go, just like dropping meaningless garbage into the trash receptacle. However, if there still are some positive thoughts about old behaviors then it may become difficult to let go for good. Even worse would be to actually go back to the garbage and dig out something we already threw away. Often for some individuals, long term success may not happen until that individual finally views their negative behavior, like drug abuse, as “garbage” and is then able to let go for good on a deep inner level. It can take practice to truly learn to let go and finally be convinced not to reach back for what we threw away.

Honesty and Goat Urine - A good illustration for honesty is to compare it to a cool glass of water with absolutely no impurities. When you are thirsty you would easily drink down that cool glass of pure water without hesitation. The problem with dishonesty is that even just a little bit of dishonesty spoils the purity of true honesty. It would be like if someone took a dropper full of *goat urine and dropped it in your cool glass of pure water. Would you still be willing to drink that glass of water? Most people certainly would not. By the same token, just a little “drop” of dishonesty can cause a lot of doubt and apprehension about everything else that comes out of a person’s mouth. Even a few small lies can do a lot to pollute the “pure waters” of trust. (*The only significance of using goat urine is to make this more memorable)



Jabs of Reality – As a counselor working with a challenging client who may lack insight, once it appears safe enough for our client to start to try to endure some honest self-evaluation, then these challenges to one’s perception of reality should be introduced gradually and in small doses. A good illustration is to compare this process to a boxer who measures, then jabs then moves and waits to see his opponent’s reaction. Once our client is ready for some basic self-awareness, then it is alright to try “jabbing” in small doses of reality, little by little to challenge our client’s irrational beliefs and lack of insight. It is important to only do this carefully in small jabs then to sit back and observe, because if a counselor challenges a client’s irrational beliefs full force, head on, all at once then that could be a proverbial “knockout punch” to the therapeutic relationship. Doses of reality are often best delivered in these small, calculated and carefully measured doses or “jabs”



Links to some others illustrations from the “Taking the Escalator” inspirational blog:
<http://takingtheescalator.blogspot.com/> (Click on any of the links below to view)

[Understanding the Disease: The Cold Facts](#) - This compares the concept of addiction to the common cold, which can occur across a wide spectrum from the “sniffles” all the way to pneumonia, instead comparing addiction to more uncompromising diseases like cancer or diabetes.

[Would You Allow Your Doctor to Get Away with This?](#) – This article looks at the way some addiction providers treat their patients as compared with the expectations that most people have for their medical providers. Often there is a double standard that should not exist in substance abuse treatment.

[Halfway There](#) – Are “half-measures” all that bad? Isn’t a halfhearted effort better than no effort at all? Read more and find out.

[Please Don’t Feed the Monster](#) – This compares negative thoughts to the whispers of a monster living in one’s head that must be starved to stop the torment

[The Right Dose](#) – This illustration is all about giving out positive “doses” of encouragement that can mean so much in life

[On Shaky Ground](#) – This illustrates the futility of criticism and harsh judgement

[Creatures of Habit](#) – Just like someone can become addicted to drugs, we can also become addicted to a variety of other negative behaviors, feelings and attitudes if we are not careful

[Breaking Down Barriers for Good](#) – Things are bound to get in the way of progress from time to time but why view them as immovable barriers. Instead, let us view each challenge as an obstacle that we can strategize to climb over, run around, sneak under, or circumvent any way we need to in order to keep moving forward on the road to inspiration and progress.



[A Substance Abuse Counselor's Favorite Drug](#) – Sincerity is like a “drug” to a substance abuse counselor because it can feel so good

[Losing Your Delusion](#) – What is alethophobia? *Hint:* We don't need to be afraid of the truth

➤ Also, read – [Fear of Reality](#)

[You Win Some, You Lose Some](#) – This short blog entry compares life with sports. Sometimes we win, sometimes we lose, but the main thing is not to give up

[Going the Distance](#) – You can sustain motivation the way a mighty and determined horse steadily continues his gallop toward the finish line

[Freedom from a Self-Imprisoned Mind](#) – A hurt conscience can become a self-imposed prison if one is not careful

[Searching for an Invincible Summer](#) – Sometimes we can build inner strength and fortitude by keeping things in the proper perspective in our lives and by drawing strength and inspiration from others

[Anxiously Digging for an Answer](#) – You don't need to sit around and wait for a magic moment but instead you have the power to start digging yourself out of the pit of distress

[Sailing the Seas of Stress](#) – Forgiveness is practical because it is like dumping extra weight off of one's proverbial ship so we can then sail forward more greater ease in life

[Surviving the Barking Dog Scenario](#) – This simple illustration provides a mental escape for dealing with people who spew out continuous negativity like a barking dog

[The Subterfuge Exclusion](#) – Excuses are like counterfeit money: *Of absolutely no value*

[The Relationship Radar](#) – Do you keep finding yourself in bad relationships? Maybe you just need to adjust your “relationship radar”

[Boredom is What Boredom Does](#) – A little bit of boredom is not a deal breaker. Boredom is often just a fork in the road

[Push Your Best Foot Forward](#) – Who can push you to be better?

