



Engagement Tool: *Just Be Nice*

One of the simplest but most important rules of being a good counselor is to ***just be nice***. It seems so easy that it may even sound silly at first but it is surprising how often people can forget this critical guideline. Forgetting to be nice is even more of a common problem in the substance abuse field than in other forms of counseling for a very specific reason: The prevalence of mandated clients. Some counselors seem to reason that just because an individual is mandated to treatment with no choice but to comply or face consequences, then there is no obligation to be nice to that client. That is simply not true. Even a mandated client is a customer and if you want to succeed in the substance abuse treatment business, then it is absolutely necessary to be nice to all of your customers. Furthermore, people just respond better to people who are nice, so being nice is simply effective, good treatment all around. This does not at all mean that the counselor cannot set boundaries and limits, just that he or she should just be nice while doing that. Being nice does not have to be viewed as a weakness. To the contrary, it is a strength. It can take a lot of self-control and experience to be nice in the face of some of the hostility, defiance and resistance we often face as substance abuse and mental health counselors. Still, being nice is the best way to put out some of those “fires” of aggression or hostility. Consider an ancient, but wise proverb:

“A soft answer turns away wrath. But a harsh word stirs up anger.” – Proverbs 15:1

All of us have seen the truth of that wise statement in action at one time or another either in our personal or professional lives or both. It is one of the first things we learn as counselors, that when someone comes at you hard, the “softer” (calmer) you need to respond in order to de-escalate the situation. This does not mean that you cannot be firm or set limits in your response, but once again, just do it nicely. We all can remember what it is like to be on the other side when perhaps we were angry with a service provider of some kind and when we expressed our complaints, how calming it was when the person we spoke with listened and then treated us nicely and with respect. Anyone in any kind of customer service position has learned the value of the lesson of just being nice. Like it or not, as a counselor, we too are in a position of customer service so it is just as important that we follow the simple “just be nice” rule. Whether we are dealing with our clients, their families, or those referring clients to us, just remember to ***be nice first and positive results will follow.***

IT'S NICE TO BE
IMPORTANT
BUT IT'S MORE
IMPORTANT TO BE
NICE



Consider the following example:

Susan is a 24 year old woman who was just mandated to treatment for a Driving Under the Influence arrest, (DUI). She has to attend a mandatory 16 weeks of outpatient weekly substance abuse treatment according to State guidelines in order for Susan to get her license back. Susan avoided the counseling for months until she was recently sent a letter from the local government stating she is going to be sent back to court due to noncompliance if she does not attend her assigned counseling immediately. Consider the following two versions of how the conversation between Susan and her new counselor could go with the difference being the counselor's attitude:

SUSAN – “I got one DUI and now I am being forced to attend these stupid classes for 16 weeks!! I don't need counseling! - What a bunch of garbage this all is!

COUNSELOR – “Listen here ma'am, I honestly don't care if you attend the 16 weeks of counseling or not. It doesn't matter to me. If you want your license back you need to attend the counseling so just make a decision and let me know, otherwise, please don't take that tone with me!”

SUSAN – “I can't believe this nonsense!”

Surely you have never had an exchange like this with a client but it is likely that you have witnessed a similar exchange in your experience. It is true that the counselor in this first scenario may be completely justified in what he is saying. Susan is clearly being rude and unpleasant and the counselor is expressing what Susan needs to do while standing up for his personal rights with regard to how he feels he should be spoken too. Still, the counselor in this scenario is forgetting the basic rule: *Just Be Nice*. Based on this first exchange, it is easy to foresee the potential for an ongoing adversarial relationship between the counselor and Susan for weeks to follow. Now consider the same scenario with Susan, but this time the counselor is following our simple rule: “Just Be Nice”

SUSAN – “I got one DUI and now I am being forced to attend these stupid classes for 16 weeks!! I don't need counseling! - What a bunch of garbage this all is!

COUNSELOR: “I understand why you must feel frustrated. Most people don't like to be forced into things, and 16 weeks is a big commitment.

SUSAN – “You're not kidding, I can't believe I have to do this to get my license back!”

COUNSELOR – “I hear what you are saying but I am sure it is important to you to get your license back. In this case, the 16 weeks of counseling is mandated so the best thing to do is just get started and stay consistent with attendance and before you know it, you'll be all done. I'll be your counselor and I'll try to make this as painless as possible but I just will need you to do your best to keep attending as regularly as possible”

SUSAN – “Your right, the only way to get this over with is to just do it. I know it's not your fault, I apologize for yelling, and I was just feeling frustrated like you said. When can I get started?”

This basic example illustrates a common scenario in the substance abuse counseling world. In Motivational Interviewing this counseling strategy we discussed earlier is referred to as “Rolling with Resistance” (Miller and Rollnick, 1991) Clearly, the best way to deal with a client who is angry, resistant, or difficult is to avoid being confrontational. It is critical to guard against “butting heads” with



our clients but rather “roll with” the client to diffuse the situation by empathizing with their feelings and working with the client as opposed to against them from an authoritative perspective. In the Escalator, the counseling technique “Just Be Nice” has an even deeper application. It is essential for counselors to be nice during challenging situations like the one just illustrated with Susan, but it does not end there. The Escalator recommends that counselors “Just Be Nice” all of the time and with all clients. It is important to even be nice when clients are *not* resistant (but it is especially important to be nice when they are). Consider some other difficult situations in substance abuse and mental health counseling:

- Someone is being disruptive in group – Address it, but: *Be Nice*
- You need to tell someone they are being discharged due to noncompliance – Do it, but *Be Nice*
- You have to tell someone their urine drug test is positive – Tell them, but *Be Nice*
- Someone is dominating the group and needs to be told to share the time with others in the group – Say it but *Be Nice*
- Someone personally insults you- Still, *Be Nice* (It’s not personal anyway, this is your job. You can still request to be spoken to respectfully, just *Be Nice* when doing that)
- Someone requests a different counselor because they don’t like you – Discuss it, but *Be Nice* – (Like it or not that is their right to at least ask)
- Someone comes to group or individual session under the influence? – Deal with the situation, but - *Be Nice!*
- A client is presenting as manic and with psychosis and they need to be psychiatrically screened for possible hospitalization immediately – Address the situation immediately, but *Be Nice* while doing it

At this point you get the picture I am sure. As a general rule, Just Be Nice, all of the time, with everyone. It is very important to take note of the following:

The “Just Be Nice” rule in no way implies that counselors should be pushovers. A counselor can still set boundaries and limits, enforce rules, structure and consequences, and command overall respect and be completely assertive and firm while still being nice.



Again, being nice as a counselor doesn’t make you weak or soft. To the contrary, to have the ability to be nice yet be firm, respectful and assertive actually elicits a lot more respect from our clients in the long run as opposed to being too authoritative or using fear of consequences as a means to promote client compliance.



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