

THE LANGUAGE OF CHANGE

- Take care to avoid platitudes and glib explanations
- Acknowledge and validate throughout
- Use acknowledgement with possibility-laced language
- Listen deeply and sit with clients' pain and suffering
- Give permission for all internal experience, not all actions
- The Inclusive Self: Address binds and injunctions in internal experience

⇒ Dissolving Impossibility Talk. If clients do not feel heard and understood they will likely close down, become angry, or let therapists know in some way that there is a problem. Still, as we listen and attend to clients, if we only reflect back their experiences many will continue to box themselves into corners by describing situations that seem hopeless, with no way out. What we want to do is add a twist to the idea of pure reflection.

1. Reflect back clients' responses or problem reports in the past tense.

Client: I'm always in trouble.

Therapist: You've been in trouble.

2. Take clients' general statements such as "everything," "everybody," "nobody," "always," and "never" and translate them into partial statements. This can be done by using qualifiers related to time (e.g., recently, in the last while, in the past month or so, most of the time, much of the time), intensity (e.g., a bit less, somewhat more), or partiality (e.g., a lot, some, most, many).

Client: Nobody understands me.

Therapist: Much of the time nobody understands you.

3. Translate clients' statements of truth or reality—the way they explain things for themselves—into perceptual statements or subjective realities (e.g., "It seems to you...", "You've gotten the idea...", etc.)

Client: I'm no good at relationships.

Therapist: So you've really gotten the idea that you're no good in relationships.

⇒ The Moving Walkway. Another way to begin to open up possibilities for change through language is by using the "moving walkway." By using language as a conveyor belt, we can help clients to create a compelling sense of a future with possibilities before they even take any action.

1. Assume the possibility of clients and associated parties finding solutions by using words such as "yet" and "so far." These words presuppose that even though things feel stuck or unchangeable in the present, sometime in the future things will change. This simple shift in language can help to create a "light at the end of the tunnel."

Client: I'll never amount to anything.

Therapist: So far you haven't seen any evidence that you'll change.

2. Recast the problem statement into a statement about the preferred future or goal.

Client: I'll never be in a loving relationship with someone.

Therapist: So you'd like to be able to have a loving relationship with someone?

3. Presuppose that changes and progress toward goals will occur by using words like "when" and "will."

Client: I can't seem to find anyone I'm compatible with.

Therapist: When you are able to find someone you're compatible with, what will be different in your life?

⇒ *Giving Permission. While we can control actions, internal experience is another matter. We want to let clients know that whatever they are experiencing is okay, acceptable, and that they can move on. There are two kinds of permission:*

1. Permission to. “You can.”
2. Permission not to have to. “You don’t have to.”

Some clients will feel stuck, thinking that they are bad or terrible for having some experience or thought, or that they shouldn’t think or experience it. In these instances, clients will need to be given permission to think or experience whatever is going on with them internally. Perhaps the best way of doing this is to normalize, which provides validation and permission. This can let clients know that they’re not bad, crazy, or weird—others have felt similarly. It’s important to note that giving permission for internal experience does not mean giving permission for all actions. Here are some ways to give permission to:

Client: I know I shouldn’t think about ending the relationship. I just can’t help it. I must be a bad person.
Therapist: It’s okay to think about ending the relationship and that doesn’t make you a bad person.

Other clients will feel that they are being dominated by internal experiences or that they should be having some internal experience that they are not. They might need permission not to have the experience. Here are some ways of giving permission not to have to:

Client: In the support group I attend for parents who’ve lost their spouses, everyone keeps saying that I need to express my anger because that’s a stage of grieving. But I’ve never felt anger. Is something wrong with me?
Therapist: Each person goes through grief in his or her own way. Some people will experience anger and some won’t. It’s okay if you don’t go through someone else’s stages and take your own path to healing.

Although either permission can be given independently, we also have found it useful to give both permissions at the same time. Here are some ways of doing this:

Client: Should I be angry or not? I don’t know.
Therapist: You can be angry and you don’t have to be angry.

If we only give one type of permission, some clients may feel pressured to experience only one part of the equation or may find the other side emerging in a more compelling or disturbing way. For example, if we only say, “It’s okay to remember,” the client might say, “But I don’t want to remember!” We can counter this bounce-back type response by giving permission to and not to have to, “It’s okay to remember and you don’t have to remember.”

⇒ *Utilization. We can take what clients bring to counseling, no matter how small, strange, or negative the behavior or idea seems and use it as a resource to open up the possibilities for change. This is in direct contrast with more traditional approaches that often view such things as symptoms or liabilities. Here are some ways of utilizing client behaviors and ideas as vehicles for change.*

Client: My family is extremely dysfunctional and chaotic.
Therapist: So you’ve had some experience dealing with dysfunction and chaos.

Utilization allows counselors to take behaviors and ideas that are typically seen as deficits, inabilities, symptoms, or negative in general, and turn them into assets. This can be a helpful way of getting clients moving, if they aren’t already doing so, in the direction of the change they are seeking.