

Chapter 10

STAGE II: HELP CLIENTS DESIGN AND SET PROBLEM-MANAGING GOALS

Problems can make clients feel hemmed in and closed off. To a greater or lesser extent they have no future, or the future they have looks troubled. But, as Gelatt (1989) noted, "The future does not exist and cannot be predicted. It must be imagined and invented." (p. 255) The interrelated tasks of Stage II outline three ways in which helpers can partner with their clients with a view to exploring and developing this better future.

Task A—Develop Problem-Managing Possibilities. "What possibilities do I have for a better future?" "What would my life look like if it looked better?" In helping clients move from problems to solutions, counselors help them develop a sense of hope.

Task B—Choose Outcomes with Impact. "What do I really want and need? What solutions are best for me?" Here, counselors help clients craft a viable change agenda from among the possibilities. Helping them shape this agenda is the central task of helping.

Task C—Demonstrate Commitment. "What am I willing to pay for what I want?" Help clients discover incentives for commitment to their change agenda. It is a further look at the economics of personal change discussed in Task C of Stage I.

TASK II-A: HELP CLIENTS DISCOVER POSSIBILITIES FOR A BETTER FUTURE "What Would a Better Life Look Like?"

Effective helping requires imagination. In this task, you help clients develop a vision of a better future. Once clients understand the nature of the problem situation or identify a key unused opportunity, they need to ask themselves, "What do I want? What would my situation look like if it were better, at least a little bit better?" Read the section "Help Clients Discover Possibilities for a Better Future" in Chapter 10 before doing these exercises.

EXERCISE 10.1: RECOGNIZE THAT THERAPY IS A BLEND OF SCIENCE, ENGINEERING, AND ART

There are what some call the STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) professions. Designing, building, and landing the Mars Rover involved all of these. Therapy is often described as a combination of art and science. It might be better to say that the helping professions involve a kind of art, a kind of engineering, and a kind of science. Given what you know about the elements of successful therapy so far and the use you have made of these elements, what is your understanding of how a kind of art, a kind of engineering, and a kind of science intermingle in what we call therapy?

1. Answer the following questions in the order that makes most sense to you. If you choose a particular order, muse on why you are doing so.

List some ways that therapy is an art.

List some way in which therapy is a kind of engineering.

List some ways in which therapy involves one kind of science (social science).

2. Discuss your answers to the following questions with a learning partner: Why did you choose the order you took? How do these three dimensions of therapy overlap and intermingle? How does each element add value to the other two?

EXERCISE 10.2: IDENTIFY PROBLEMS AND UNUSED OPPORTUNITIES IN THE SOCIAL SETTINGS OF LIFE

This is another exercise that will help you review areas in which clients have problems and also help you identify your own strengths and weaknesses. Individuals belong to and participate in a number of different social settings in life: family, circle of friends, clubs, church groups, school groups, work groups, and the like. People are also affected by what goes on in their neighborhoods and the cities and towns in which they live. Larger systems, such as state and national governments, have their ways of entering people's lives.

1. Chart the social settings of your life as in the example below. The person in the example is Mitch, 45, a principal of an inner-city high school in a large city. He is married and has two teenage sons. Neither son attends the high school of which he is principal. He is seeing a counselor because of exhaustion and bouts of hostility and depression. He has had a complete physical check-up and there is no evidence of any medical problem.
2. Choose two or three social settings that are currently important in your life. These are settings in which you are experiencing problems or have unused opportunities.
3. Review issues, demands, conflicts, concerns. Now take each key social setting and write down issues or concerns in that setting. For instance, some of things Mitch writes are:

School

- Some faculty members want a personal relationship with me and I have neither the time nor the desire.
- Some faculty members have retired on the job. I don't know what to do with them.
- Some of the white faculty members are suspicious of me and distant just because I'm black.
- One faculty member wrote the district superintendent and said that I was undermining her reputation with other faculty members. This is not true.
- The students, both individually and through their organizations, keep asking me to be more liberal while their parents are asking me to tighten things up.

Family

- My wife says that I'm letting school consume me; she complains constantly because I don't spend enough time at home. Even though she wants me to spend more time at home, she criticizes me for not spending more time with my parents.
- My kids seem to withdraw from me because I'm a double authority figure, a father and a principal.

Parents

- My mother is infirm; my retired father calls me and tells me what a hard time he's having getting used to retirement.
- My mother tells me not to be spending time with her when I have so much to do and then she complains to my wife and my father when I don't show up.

School District

- I would like to become the district superintendent. I think I could do a lot of good.

Friends

- My friends say that I spend so much time at work involving myself in crisis management that I have no time left for them; they tell me I'm doing myself in.
4. Review possibilities for a better future. Choose two concerns arising from two different social settings of your life. Spell out some of the possibilities for a better future in this area. What would this problem or unused opportunity look like if it were managed better or solved? What are some of the things that would be in place that are not now in place? Use the following probes to help yourself brainstorm possibilities.

- Here's what I need
- Here's what I want
- Here are some items on my wish list
- When I'm finished I will have
- There will be
- Will have in place
- I will consistently be
- There will be more of
- There will be less of

For instance, Mitch, in reviewing the conflict between his work and his friends, comes up with these possibilities: more time with his friends, greater flexibility in managing his calendar at work, better integration of his friendships with his home life, a more clear-cut division between his work setting and the other social settings of his life, more time for himself, a clearer understanding of his career aspirations and the costs associated with them, and better delegation on his part to the members of the school administrative team. These are all possibilities for a better future. Now do the same for yourself. Use a separate piece of paper to map out the social settings of your life (as Mitch did).

First social setting.

Key issues, concerns, demands, conflicts, and unused opportunities in this social setting.

Possibilities for a better future in this social setting.

Second social setting.

Key issues, concerns, demands, conflicts, and unused opportunities in this social setting.

Possibilities for a better future in this area of concern.

5. Review your findings with a learning partner.

EXERCISE 10.3: BRAINSTORM POSSIBILITIES FOR A BETTER FUTURE

This exercise focuses on a number of cases, many of which you have seen before. Now you are asked to put yourself in each person's shoes and brainstorm possibilities for a better future. What would things look like if they looked better? If you were this person, what are some of the things you would want instead of what you've got?

1. Read the case. Put yourself in this person's shoes. Make his or her problem situation your own.
2. Brainstorm a number of possibilities for a better future. What would you want if you were this person?

Case 1. Tim was a bright, personable young man. During college, he was hospitalized after taking a drug overdose during a bout of depression. He spent six months as an inpatient. He was assigned to "milieu therapy," an amorphous mixture of work and recreation designed more to keep patients busy than to help them grapple with their problems and engage in constructive change. He was given drugs for his depression, seen occasionally by a psychiatrist, and assigned to a therapy group that proved to be quite aimless. After leaving the hospital, his confidence shattered, he left college and got involved with a variety of low-paying, part-time jobs. He finally finished college by going to night school, but he avoided full-time jobs for fear of being asked about his past. Buried inside him was the thought, "I have this terrible secret that I have to keep from everyone." A friend talked him into taking a college-sponsored communication skills course one summer. The psychologist running the program, noting Tim's rather substantial natural talents together with his self-effacing ways, remarked to him one day, "I wonder what kind of ambitions you have." In an instant, Tim realized that he had buried all thoughts of ambition. After all, he didn't "deserve" to be ambitious. Tim, instinctively trusting the program director, divulged the "terrible secret" about his hospitalization for the first time.

Jot down a range of possibilities for a better future.

Case 2. A nun, 44 years old, a member of a counselor training group, has been talking about her dissatisfaction with her present job. Although a nurse, she is presently teaching in a primary school because, she says, of the "urgent needs" of that school. When pressed, she refers briefly to a history of job dissatisfaction. In the group, she has shown herself to be an active, intelligent, and caring woman who tends to speak and act in self-effacing ways. She mentions how obedience has been stressed throughout her years in the religious order. She does mention, however, that things have been "letting up a bit" in recent years. The younger sisters don't seem to be as preoccupied with obedience as she is. She says: "The reason I'm talking about my job is that I don't want to become a counselor and then discover it's another job I'm dissatisfied with. It would be unfair to the people I'd be working with and unfair to my religious order, which is paying for my education. Of course, I have no iron-clad assurance that I'll be put in a job that will enable me to use my counselor training."

A range of possibilities for a better future.

Case 3. Marcus, 47 years old, is a successful businessman whose life is in fairly good order. However, Yves, his younger brother, is struggling financially. His credit card debt is enormous. For Marcus, the problem is how to extend a helping hand to his younger brother without robbing him of his

self-responsibility. He explains his dilemma to a colleague at work, "Yves is very sensitive to this older brother-younger brother stuff. Anyway, he has it in his head that I see him as incompetent and any help I offer is seen through that filter. I suppose that I'll always be the successful big brother and he will always be the inept little brother. It's not that way really but ... What I can't do is let our past history force me to stand off to the side with my hands in my pockets and do nothing when I know I could be of some help. I'm not sure what kind of help would make sense."

A range of possibilities for a better future.

Case 4. This man, now 64 years old, retired early from work when he was 62. He and his wife wanted to take full advantage of the "golden" years. But his wife died a year after he retired. At the urging of friends, he has finally come to a counselor. He has been exploring some of the problems his retirement has created for him. His two married sons live with their families in other cities. In the counseling sessions, he has been dealing somewhat repetitiously with the theme of loss. He says: "I seldom see the kids. I enjoy them and their families a lot when they do come. I get along real well with their wives. But now that my wife is gone... (pause) ... and since I've stopped working ... (pause) ... I seem to just ramble around the house aimlessly, which is not like me at all. I suppose I should get rid of the house, but it's filled with a lot of memories—bittersweet memories now. There were a lot of good years here."

A range of possibilities for a better future.

EXERCISE 10.4: HELP SOMEONE DEVELOP POSSIBILITIES FOR A BETTER FUTURE

In this exercise, you are asked to help one of the other members of your group develop possibilities for a better future.

1. Divide up into groups of three for this exercise.
2. Assume, sequentially, the roles of client, helper, and observer.
3. In the role of client, provide a summary of one of the problem situations or undeveloped opportunities you focused on in any of the previous exercises. Or, if you prefer, choose a new issue.
4. In the role of counselor, listen to your partner summarize his or her problem situation or undeveloped opportunity. Use empathy and probes to get a full statement of the issue.
5. Finally, help the other develop possibilities for a better future. Use empathy, probes, summaries, and invitations to self-challenge to help the other expand the list.

Example: Michael, a junior in college majoring in business studies, has given the following summary of the problem situation: "My uncle runs a small business. He's offered me a kind of internship in the family business. While such an opportunity fits perfectly with my career plans, I have done nothing to develop it. Right now, it's only an interesting idea. But it still seems too good an opportunity to miss." Trish, his helper, uses all the communication skills learned up to this point to help him develop possibilities for a productive internship. Some of the dialogue goes like this:

TRISH: So you haven't taken the time yet to spell out what the internship could look like.

MICHAEL: No. Generally, I see the internship as something that would bring to life the stuff I'm getting out of business books right now.

TRISH: So the internship would give you a chance for some hands-on experience with business realities that are just concepts now. What could the internship look like?