

## Play Tricks Column

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**Q:** My clients too often seem to have an epiphany in the office and then go home and forget all about it—till the next session. Then it seems that we're starting over at square one. How can I help my clients hold onto the new insights and new skills that they learn in therapy, and follow through on what they have learned?

**A:** Helping our clients while they are with us can be a tough task, but it often seems even harder to send them out the door. Back in the routine of their daily lives, it is all too easy for our clients to return to old patterns, without stopping to examine their actions and reactions in light of what they've learned in therapy. Every person quite literally has a mind of their own, with their own neurologically-driven reflexive patterns of thought and behavior. So even in their quiet moments, when they have a chance to reflect on the problems that originally brought them to our office, they are much more likely to follow the familiar beaten track of their thoughts instead of exploring the new trail that we blazed together in the last session. In addition, those who do try to remember what their therapist said may easily be betrayed by their memory playing tricks on them, recalling either inaccurately or incompletely the words their therapist used—and their meaning.

This difficulty in remembering progress made from session to session—and putting it to use—is one of the greatest sources of frustration for therapists and their clients. It slows down progress when, rather than building on last week's two steps forward, we're continuously obliged to take one step back to review, remind and reinforce. While it's true that repetition is usually indispensable in the acquisition of new knowledge, we can reduce the need to repeat ourselves with some creative memory techniques.

In my practice I've systematically used lots of mnemonic techniques to help clients retain and apply new understandings and new competencies. To make new knowledge gained from therapy stronger, longer-lasting and more accessible we have to make sure that it is recorded the way all strong, long-lasting and accessible memories are. That is, if you deliver the message you want your client to remember in a way that assures its retention, by applying the principles of normal learning and memory formation, you will reduce the need for repetition. There are many ways of doing this, and once you get used to using them you will be amazed at how simply and effectively they can be applied.

### Stimulate the Senses

The first important principle of learning and memory is that multisensory memory is stronger than verbal memory alone. Sitting in our offices, talking with our clients, we too often restrict ourselves to a tiny fraction of the brain's mechanisms for learning. While words can be powerful, they usually recruit only the verbal centers of

the mind. We're much more effective when we directly solicit the participation of the visual and kinesthetic centers as well, and by so doing activate the implicit memory systems.

For a client who is having trouble setting limits, for example, and is overwhelmed by the demands of other people for his time, attention, and physical space, you might represent his difficulty with an illustration of a fence in a poor state of repair, with lots of gaps and sags that let people through anytime and anywhere. The result is that nothing the client is trying to establish in his life has a chance to flourish—grass is trampled, gardens destroyed, and no development of personal projects is possible. Working with a simple illustration of a fence—a drawing, a picture from a magazine—would help send your message to the visual centers in the occipital lobe of the brain, while your discussion of invasive people and self-protection will tie that visual activation to the specific words and meanings in the verbal centers interpreted in the left temporal lobe. Even better, you can give your client the illustration you've worked on together, sending him home with a tangible anchor for the insights he has gained.

The more sensory modalities you can recruit in your communication with your client, the more chances you have of reaching them. Essentially, each additional sense involved in learning represents a form of repetition. If your client can hear and think about setting limits while seeing a fence—or, better yet, drawing it himself—and then take with him a tangible representation of the fence, he's already had three or four repetitions in different modalities. Those recordings will continue to resonate with each other in ways that words alone could never do, creating much more functional memory.

### Elicit Emotion

Emotional memories are formed more rapidly and imprinted more deeply than any other form of memory. When we are filled with joy, sadness or fear, activation of the limbic system primes the brain to record information with higher efficiency.

Moderately heightened emotion, particularly positive emotion, will have the same effect in therapy. I remember using this principle with one little girl—we'll call her Molly—who had been very close to her grandmother until Grandma had a disabling stroke. Partially paralyzed, with her speech centers damaged, the grandmother was unable to tell stories, cook, garden or even hug her granddaughter like before. Now Molly didn't want to spend time with her grandmother, who had becoming frightening and grotesque in her eyes. Yet the situation left her very sad, along with her mother and grandmother.

In therapy, I wanted to connect the unhappy little girl with some positive emotions before addressing the question of her grandmother. Since her mother had told me that Molly loved to draw, I chose a particularly lovely piece of drawing paper, with a pleasant texture and an invitingly immaculate surface. I asked Molly what she could do with such a nice piece of paper. Almost immediately she brightened and began enthusiastically describing all the things that she might draw on it. When she was clearly feeling quite happy, I made a link to her grandmother, saying that before her stroke, there were lots of things Molly could do with Grandma that were fun. While still talking, I tore away about a third of the sheet, explaining that now there is a part

of Grandma that doesn't work, but—like the remaining two-thirds of the sheet of paper—there is still so much left to Grandma that is wonderful. Handing her the remaining sheet, I invited Molly to tell me what she could still do with the lovely paper, and with Grandma. Her love for art and for her grandmother cued a heightened emotional state, helping her incorporate the new understanding of her Grandma's changed circumstances. During the remainder of the brief session we were able to explore together how she could continue to enjoy being with her grandmother, and she was able to retain a changed perspective when she left, taking her beautiful paper with her as a souvenir. Her mother later reported that Molly was again spending most of every Sunday afternoon with her grandmother.

### Link to Prior Learning

If you read a list of 15 unusual words to a group of people and then ask them to write down as many words as they can remember, most people will come up with only five or six. But if, as you read the list, you connect each word to something familiar, their recall success rate will often double. Such observations are the basis for another principle of memory formation: knowledge builds on prior knowledge. For example, if you found yourself in a technical seminar on the latest findings in astrophysics you would probably be utterly lost, and afterwards you would not remember a word of what the speaker said. The astrophysicist in the next seat, however, has a specialized knowledge base which allows her to assimilate the new information by attaching it solidly to the framework that she already possesses. Likewise, creating links between the new insights the client is acquiring in therapy and a body of knowledge they already possess decreases the need for repetition. Rare is the client who shares our knowledge of human psychology, so we need to stay within the client's system of reference. With the client in our first example, linking the concept of setting limits with a metaphor of fences works very well for almost anyone who shares his difficulty. We already understand the purpose of fences from direct experience; adding the symbolic meaning is then just an added association.

### Increase the Interest

The mind is attracted to novelty, because it often represents either threat or opportunity. Evolutionarily, we've been programmed to focus on new and different things since doing so affected our survival as a species. Pop quiz: what color are the numbers on your neighbor's house across the street? Can't remember? It's not at all surprising. Your attention has probably never been focused on them, unless they have chosen purple neon numbers! I'm not advocating that you use purple neon signs with your clients, but getting their attention is crucial to conveying a memorable message. Anything you say while they are not fully engaged is essentially a waste of breath. Clients cannot learn and remember unless they are really paying attention.

Use attention-getting visual props, riddles, humor and even your tone of voice to attract and retain your client's attention. Ever notice how people lean forward when you whisper? It's a great device to recapture a client's wandering focus. Developing a repertoire of jokes and riddles pertinent to numerous circumstances gives you a

wonderful resource for soliciting your client's willing involvement. Surprising your client with whimsical toys that act as therapeutic props is a great way to add fun to the therapy session. The process can be highly enrich if you give your clients experience, not just words.

#### Tantalize with Teasers

The last important principle of learning is that the mind seeks answers. Partial information is almost intolerable torment to the mind. Our curiosity demands that we seek further data until we have the whole story. If we're presented with an image of three little angles, positioned just right on a page, we automatically complete the story by "seeing" a triangle. This tendency to search for answers can be used in the therapeutic session, to help convey messages that the client will register and hold on to.

One of my favorite uses of this principle is with clients in burnout, who are so lacking in energy that they often don't seem to be hearing a word I say. I explain that in their energy level or in their state, they are at the 0-to-2 level on a scale of ten. Then I tell them that they clearly don't have a 0-to-2 jar. A what?, they invariably ask, even if they weren't paying attention before. A 0-to-2 jar, I repeat. Flummoxed, they repeat their question and I repeat my response, until they demand to know what on earth a 0-to-2 jar is. Suddenly I have a client who is fully engaged. We're not talking about their problems, or analyzing solutions, but they're right there with me, trying to find out what the heck I'm talking about. Then I satisfy that curiosity. Taking an empty margarine tub or other small jar with a lid, I label it "0-2." When a person is in burnout, I explain, they don't have the energy to make wise decisions or to solve problems effectively. What you need to do is to write down on a piece of paper any problems, pending decisions, or troubling thoughts and put them in the jar. Close the jar, and don't open it except during therapy. This simple "trick" serves to awaken the client's curiosity, involve them in the session and nourishes a terrific therapeutic bond from the outset. And most of my clients take their "0-2" jar home, many of them keeping it for years as a reminder.

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You may have noticed that these memory tricks—Senses, Emotion, Link to Learning, Interest and Teasers—spell out a memorable acronym: SELL IT! A happy accident, I assure you, but one which points to a modern reality. Advertisers and marketers use similar memory-enhancing methods to sell products to us every day. They play to our senses, manipulate our emotions, link new information to familiar truths, provoke our interest and tease us with cliff-hanger commercials. All this to create lasting memories and positive associations for their product. But we, as therapists, can use the same powerful principles of memory and learning to "sell" our clients the key lessons that will enhance their well-being.

Danie Beaulieu is a psychologist, author, and international speaker based in Quebec City. Her books on Impact Techniques, due out in English in 2004, detail hundreds of concrete representations and visual metaphors to help communicate memorable lessons to clients. Danie is also the author of Eye Movement Integration Therapy

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