

Running Empty: Techniques for helping clients replenish their resources

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Q: *“Positive psychology” and “competency-based” approaches are in these days, but many of my clients are so mired in negativity that they can’t access their inner resources. What can I do to help mobilize their strengths?*

A: This is a perennial challenge for therapists. We know that success breeds success, but with an emotionally depleted client, how can we coax forth that first experience of vitality and competence, so that more can follow? Often our clients have considerable personal resources at their disposal, but they’re too depressed to recognize or activate them on their own behalf.

In my experience, talk therapy has limited power to activate these dormant resources. Words alone are simply too puny to lift the heavy weight of helplessness and torpor that so many clients lug with them into the therapy room. But I’ve been able to cut through the fog and rapidly help clients recognize and activate their strengths by using “impact” techniques. Along with Ed Jacobs, the originator of Impact Therapy, I’ve developed these multisensory methods to help make abstract ideas concrete. They reconnect clients to a more vital sense of self, which generates a stronger effect than discussion alone. Each technique is highly versatile and easily incorporated into any therapy approach.

It’s in the Cards

Each of us has made it through life thus far by relying on a repertoire of inner resources. Of course, we all have our shortcomings, too. You could call this the hand life has dealt us. Among the most important

things therapy can accomplish is to remind people of the good cards they’re holding—their personal strengths, skills, and relationship resources—at a time when they may be overfocusing on their weak suits.

You can make this notion powerfully tangible via an inexpensive deck of cards. Ask your client to recall a time when he felt successful or satisfied with some aspect of his life, and to describe a personal trait he used to create that rewarding situation. If the client responds, “perseverance,” ask whether he used an ace, a king, or a queen of perseverance to succeed. Then select that card from the deck and write *Perseverance* on it with a bold felt-tip pen. (Bold is important: you want to make this a statement of strength, not a tentative, penciled-in suggestion!) Continue to elicit

other traits and assets that have helped your client to succeed in the past—for example, self-discipline, generosity, technical ability, humor, family support, the caring of a special friend—and repeat the process of selecting and labeling appropriate cards. This exercise, in itself, will help your client identify and recognize resources he may have forgotten he possesses.

When you've accumulated at least five strong cards, present the cards to your client, one by one. Explain that he still holds this terrific hand, chockful of talents, emotional strengths, and self-knowledge, and that he simply needs to play it in the situation he now faces. Encourage him to take some time to look at his cards and take in his triumphant array of aces, kings, and queens. This in-the-moment act of "holding a strong hand" can help a client move from merely intellectually appreciating his strengths to viscerally experiencing himself as a winner. Give him the cards to take home as reminders of the inner resources that have served him well in the past—and will again.

Inhabiting Strength

Some clients are so deeply depressed or burned out that they're unable even to begin to examine their problems or think about solutions. You might be tempted to encourage such clients to engage in some simple activity, such as taking a walk, help rev up their energy, and give therapy a chance to work. However, assigning clients what's essentially homework when their energy is already hovering at zero is apt only to deepen their sense of failure. In such situations, therapy may simply stall out, unless the client can rediscover the physical and emotional states associated with being a stronger, more capable, person.

One of the most effective ways to bring clients into a more resourceful state is chair work. When I recently asked my client Jeanne to rate her energy level on a scale of 1 to 10, she sighed, "One." Through the distorting prism of her longstanding depression, Jeanne couldn't think coherently about how to move forward. I asked her if she could remember how it felt when she was at about 3 or 4 out of 10. When she nodded, I asked her to sit in another chair and tell me about it. Moving to the empty chair, she began to describe herself as an avid knitter, an amateur painter, and an enthusiastic cook, who loved making meals for family and friends.

Seizing on the chance to build on success, I asked her whether she could ever remember reaching a 7 or 8. "Yes," she said without hesitation. "Even a 9!"

Switching to a new chair, she described the summer that she'd taken a trip to Nova Scotia with her husband, and how they'd sung and joked throughout the vacation. As she recounted the story, a smile of pure pleasure crept onto her previously immobile face, and she began to gesture animatedly. After letting her inhabit that joyful state for a few more minutes, encouraging her to recall more details, I asked her to face the 1-out-of-10 chair.

“What advice would Jeanne at 9 give to Jeanne at 1—the woman who came in to see me today?” I asked. From her rediscovered resourceful state, she was able to advise herself to begin to take some baby steps forward, including forgiving herself for her depression, and to continue to spend a few minutes each day reliving times when she felt capable and resilient.

Sensing Success

The five senses can be potent tools for reconnecting clients with their personal strengths. As we've all experienced, certain smells, tastes, sounds, and sights have the power to elicit deeply ingrained emotional responses. For some, the aroma of freshly baked bread or spicy cinnamon is the “comfort smell” that evokes home, safety, and love. For others, the sound of a player piano or a chirping chickadee may trigger memories of well-being.

Working with sensory stimuli proved transformative for my client Ernest. Depressed after losing his job of 30 years, he was ashamed of his limited education and feared that he might never find another job. When I asked him to identify something that he associated with a feeling of pride, he immediately responded, *patates jaunes*, a humble Quebec dish, made of potatoes cooked to a golden brown in rich broth. His family had eaten this dish every day when he was a child, but because his mother presented it with flair and his father was so proud that his family never went hungry, Ernest associated its savory taste with competence and self-respect. As I asked for more memories of the experience, he recalled that, during family dinners, the radio had constantly played a tune called “The Joyous Troubadours,” which had become associated in Ernest's memory with those simple, satisfying family meals.

I didn't have to think hard to devise an assignment for Ernest: go home and play “The Joyous Troubadours” 10 times a day. Not only would this experience recruit his auditory sense with a palpably upbeat melody, but the music would enlist his olfactory memories as well. This exercise helped him reconnect with his buried self-

respect and dignity, which, in turn, helped him apply for work with renewed self-confidence. Within a few months, he'd landed a new, full-time job.

Bringing Water to the Well

Clients often come into therapy with the vague notion that the therapist will take control and somehow “make things better.” But our job is to help clients assume ownership of their own growth and healing. You can help buck-passing clients take more responsibility with a simple visual exercise. Set up six or seven clear plastic cups on a table, with water in only some of them. Each cup represents a different part of the client's life—work, friendships, family, marriage, etc.—while the water in each cup represents the amount of energy and resources the client is pouring into each part of her life.

Now imagine you have a client who's sought your help because of serious difficulties with her husband. But rather than address these pressing issues, she's spent the past three sessions talking about her boss and her brother. Hold up two of the water-filled cups, saying, “It seems that you're devoting a lot of your resources to your work and your relationship with your brother.” Then pick up an empty cup and invert it to emphasize the fact that nothing is in it. Tell her: “But it seems you aren't putting a lot of energy into your marriage right now.” For even greater impact, use a felt-tip marker to label the cups “full,” “half-full,” and “empty.”

Help your client to mobilize her resources by saying, “How about if, for the time we're together, you pour your energy into the part of your life that was troubling you enough to bring you here to see me?” Then pour the water from the other cups into the “marriage cup” and set it on the table. Tell her: “Your emotional and mental resources aren't a bottomless well—everyone has limits to his or her energy. Making progress will be much easier if you decide to focus your resources where you need them right now.”

Once again, this sensory approach can help a client wake up and more directly experience the reality and power of her own resources. In this case, the client, literally, “sees” the impact of taking a proactive role in her own therapy, and now has a vivid metaphor for managing many aspects of her life without letting the well run dry.

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