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On the Importance of Inclusivity

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Rob McNeilly

creating solutions together

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Clients come to see us because they are stuck, that is, they know only one interpretation for a particular stimulus in their life, and that interpretation leads to one response. Although this is a rather simplistic model of psychotherapy, it seems to fit the facts. This means that our main task as therapists is to help clients discover choices in interpretation and choices in responses. Then, they are not stuck!

Also, both we and our clients tend to think about what is troubling them is in an either/or fashion. They are depressed, panicked, anxious, obsessive, sad, grieving, unhappy, desperate, blocked, and limited OR they are not. Bill O'Hanlon (O'Hanlon, 2003) found a fascinating way to deal with this stuck state of affairs. He calls it "inclusivity" which gets into the realm of both/and. This is an oxymoronic confusion or scrambling meaning technique. This is best illustrated by the following statements, generally prefaced by "I wonder how it would be or feel to be ... "

happily depressed; depressedly happy
compulsively spontaneous; spontaneously compulsive
obsessively casual; casually obsessive
sadly delighted; delightedly or happily sad
desperately free; freely desperate
actively blocked; blocked actively
grievingly full of warm memories; warmly grieving
calmly panicked; panicked calmly
anxiously at peace; peacefully or calmly anxious
stressedly calm; calmly stressed
openly protective; protectively open
freely dependent; dependently free

Please note that these are all oxymorons like a “down escalator” or “jumbo shrimp.”

Recently, in the support group I facilitate one of the members was talking about being depressed. This was first normalized by another group member talking about how depressed she had been and is still occasionally depressed about having cancer. I pointed out that almost everyone I know who has been diagnosed with a life-challenging disease goes through depression at one time or another. Then, I said, “I wonder what it would be like to be happily depressed.” The confusion that appeared in his face was a wonder to behold. Others in the group got the idea and added many both/and comments. (I leave this to your imagination.) He began to smile with the novelty of these new ideas. How could he be depressedly alive and active? What would it be like to be energetically slothful?

Inclusive statements scramble thinking and provide interesting choices to what had hitherto been restricted. I hope that the more you think about the transformation involved in going from either/or to both/and will provide you with choices in your own life and also choices for your clients. You might even become effectively ineffective, for example!

Reference

O’Hanlon. B. (2003). A guide to inclusive therapy. 26 methods of respectful resistance-dissolving therapy. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.