

What Type of Therapeutic Relationship do You Have?

Ideas from Solution Focused Therapy

to help overcome a common therapeutic challenge & build engaged, collaborative relationships as a vehicle for change, growth, and healing.



“There is no such thing as resistance: This assumption is intended to guide the SF [Solution Focused] therapists away from power struggles with clients. We have always been guided by Erickson’s concept of utilizing what clients bring to therapy (Erickson and Rossi, 1976; Erickson, 1977), an idea that was translated into the solution-focused concept of “cooperating with how clients cooperate” (deShazer, 1982: 9 – 10). This helps SF therapists to focus more on the clients’ point of view than on their own, and to avoid arguments about change. The most helpful question SF therapists can ask themselves is

“What is motivating this person?” not “Why is this person resistant?”

Lipchik, Becker, Brasher, Derks and Volkman, 2005: 57

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Take a moment to consider:

What type of therapeutic relationship do you have with your client? With each family member?

With the other service providers/stakeholders involved? Would you say it's a customer relationship? Or not?

And Remember, the therapeutic relationship classification is about the relationship – not a personal trait of the client.



Customer Relationship

Ready and willing to solve the problem.

See themselves as part of the solution and/or part of the problem.

Are open to questions and suggestions by the therapist.

Are prepared to take action.

Demonstrates motivation to change.

Likely to engage in a behavioral inter-session task.

Example: “I am open to talking about the unhelpful pattern, my role in it, and what I can take responsibility for.”

Complainant Relationship

The client acknowledges there is a problem but complains that it is someone or something else that needs to change.

The client finds it useful to talk to a helping professional but does not yet see how their own behaviour could alleviate the problem.

The client complains about someone else or something else needing to change, e.g., another person, medication, the professional, or “a miracle”.

Example: “They just need to”

Visitor Relationship

The client is not invested in change and/or who doesn't really know what they want.

May have no expectation or desire for change.

May not even recognize or believe there is a problem.

May consider themselves to be mandated clients if e.g., pressured to attend by a family member.

Example: “I don't see a problem but my partner said that if I didn't get counselling they would leave”,

“My mum is making me come even though I am fine.”

Mandated Client Relationship

Clients who do not choose to engage but are required to participate in services.

Different from those informally pressured into services by e.g., parents, partner, school.

Mandated to attend.

Example - “Child Safety said I need to work with you before I can see my kids”, “My Youth Justice order says I have to have 10 sessions with a counselor.”

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Tips for Complainant Relationships

- Remember: In this relationship the client may be unlikely or less likely to complete a direct task that requires action from them, but more likely to do an observational or thinking task.
- Start with where the client is at:
 - Acknowledge what the client is bringing to the session, including their experiences e.g., if they are distressed, “How have you managed to keep going in the face of this problem?”.
 - It is not helpful to want change for your client more than your client wants change for themselves, and it’s not helpful to try to convince them e.g., “Yes, but...”
- In this relationship it helps to keep the emphasis is on deciding on and initiating the desired behaviour for the preferred future.
 - Encourage the client to notice and reflect on times when the problem is not present or present to a lesser degree e.g., “When has the voice of anxiety been not so loud?.”
 - Help your client consider what was different at those times and what they did differently at those times.
- Notice times the client catches even a small a ‘glimpse’ of what they would prefer to be happening, their “preferred future” or “desired outcomes” and get really curious about this.
 - Use questions to explore the glimpse in detail.
 - Details give information that helps construct solutions.
- It can help some clients to notice advantages of change when you encourage them to go slow or stay the same e.g., “This problem has been around for a while, I don’t think we should rush to change.”
 - This can create perturb clients as they often feel the tension of staying the same and push for change themselves.

Helpful Questions for a Complainant Relationship:

- “What is the best way I can support you?”
- “Who is this [problem] a problem for?”
- “In what way is this a problem for you?”
- “When is the [problem] not present, or not present to it’s full degree of awfulness?”
- “What gives you hope that this problem can be solved?”
- “What are you holding on to that hasn’t been helping ... that you might be better served by letting go of?”
- “What have you considered doing but not yet tried?”
- “What would be the smallest change that could make a difference/alter the course of things?”
- “How have you been coping?”
- “What have you been doing to get through your days?”
- “What have you done to keep things from getting worse?”
- “Imagine that [the change the client would like] occurs. What difference would it make to you? What would you do differently?”
- “Imagine the other [person or problem] doesn’t change. What will you do? What’s in your control?”
- “Imagine the other person does start acting the way you’d like them to, how would you respond differently to them? What would you do that you aren’t doing at the moment?”
- “If things were going better what would you notice in your relationship?”
- “How do you manage to resist the invitations [the other person] sends to [e.g., over function, feel guilty], even though it may be hard for you to do so?”

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Tips for Visitor Relationships

Remember: The main goal with this relationship is to establish a meaningful connection to increase the client's interest in returning. Over time, the goal shifts to helping the client articulate a personal goal that is something for which they are a customer and are motivated for.

- Adopt a non-judgmental stance and empathise with the client's position.
- Acknowledge that the client would rather not be there.
- The best approach with this type of relationship is to listen, sympathize with being forced to see you, and offer a compliment on whatever the client is doing that is good for them.
- Find out what the client would like to achieve from coming along to see you.
- Find out how the client ended up in therapy.
 - Join with the client on their understanding.
 - You do not need to “prove” to them that there is a problem.
- Clients in this relationship can be given genuine positive feedback and compliments
 - E.g., “I can see how much you must love your kids, that you are willing to come along and see me.”
- Do not give intersessions tasks.
- It's important to “hasten slowly”

Helpful Questions for a Visitor Relationships:

(NB Some overlap with mandated client relationship questions).

“Whose idea was it for you to come along and see me today? And what do they think we should do here?”

“If we did decide to do that, how would things change?”

“Is that a change you would like?”

“What would be the minimum you have to do differently to get [service/family member] off your back?” “What would it take for you to do that?” “When was the last time that you did that?”

“I understand you were told to come here. How do you manage to get here? How did you decide to follow through with coming along?”

“Suppose you did have a goal, something we could work on that would be helpful, what would it be?”

“What would happen if you didn't attend these sessions?”

“What would we have to talk about today for you to say this was a good use of your time?”

“What would happen if you did something different?”

“What needs to change in order for you to not have to come back here?”



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Tips for Mandated Client Relationships

Mandated Client Relationship Considerations:

- Begin by assuming:
 - The client probably does not want anything from you.
 - The client may have had negative past experiences of services.
 - This helps the professional keep a mindset to go slowly.
- Respond to anger and negativity without personalizing this and by starting with the client's story.
- Base your next question on the last response e.g., “Oh, you don’t. What tells you that you don’t need to be here?”, “Oh you’ve seen counsellors before. What happened? What was helpful ... or not?”
- Listen for who and what are important to the client, get curious and ask questions about this.
- Use relationship questions to address context and invite solution building, don't challenge 'facts' or push 'demands' of agencies e.g., “I can see it’s important for you to go home. Do you parents know this?”
- Incorporate non-negotiables by respectfully giving clear information and proceeding with not knowing questions instead of confronting clients.
- Give control to clients of how to talk about situations, how to talk about themselves, what to talk about and what possibilities might be useful e.g., what is your understanding of....?”
- When met with silence, try “You must have a good reason for not wanting to talk, Can you tell me about the reason?”

Helpful Questions for a Mandated Client Relationship Questions

(NB some overlap with visitor relationship questions).

“Oh, you don’t need to be here. What tells you that?”

“You’ve seen counsellors before. What happened?”

“Client - “My parents make me so mad – always checking up on me and asking if I am doing drugs again”. Practitioner: “Oh, so you would like things to be different with your parents?”

“What is your understanding of the situation?”

“Do you agree with your parents when they say that ...?”

“What do you want different?”

“Knowing yourself and your partner/parents the way you do, what are the chances that talking to them about ... will be useful?”

"Based on what you heard in court, what is the court expecting you to do before your children will be returned?"

"What would it take to convince the CSO that it is safe for you to visit with your children?"

"Suppose you decided to do that. What would be different between you and your kids/partner/boss?"

"What else would be different for you?"

"Knowing yourself the way you do, which of these things would you be able to do?"

"How do you know you can do that?"



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General Ideas for Inviting a Customer Relationship

- Invite clients to talk about skills and successes.
- Look for exceptions to the problem.
- Engage in problem free talk to find out about what matters to the client.
- Ask competence questions to promote clients talking about successes and complimenting themselves.
 - E.g., “How did you do that?” “How did you manage to do that?”
- If clients are reluctant because they think therapy is “wishy-washy”, consider contracting an honest and direct approach
 - Honesty and directness need to be balanced with warmth and caring.
 - E.g., “I prefer to be honest and direct. How do you like to work?” “I prefer to not beat around the bush. How about you?”
- Carefully tailor questions during the session and homework tasks to the client’s level of motivation for behaviour change.
- If the client is focused on another person changing, ask them what difference it would make to them if the other person changes. This shifts the client’s focus from the other person to desired outcome.
- Remember that is most important is the relationship between the client, the professional, and the goal.
- Keep in mind that inviting a customer relationship is not always successful, but it is always possible to give the client a positive relational experience with yourself, and this plants seeds of hope and trust for possible future service engagement.
- It really helps to periodically ask ourselves what the client is a customer for.
- The suggested questions in this resource are not a checklist to run through, they are a smorgasbord of inspiration to choose from.

“A client, like anyone else, is invested in doing things his own way and remaining faithful to his own ideas rather than simply accepting someone else’s. Thus, the therapist always needs to begin by respecting the client’s ideas and respecting his purposes and goals as the starting point of therapy.”

Kim Berg, 1989: 21

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