

Help People Change By Doing Things Differently In Session

In the early phases of the counseling relationship, it is important to help clients feel heard and understood. Empathize with them without minimizing, critiquing, redirecting or countering what they say. Allowing them to fully explore their own thoughts and feelings will also help you understand their struggle more accurately. Once rapport and deep relational trust has been built, then you can practice with them new ways of being and doing. Change is difficult, so in the safety of your relationship, you can support them by practicing little steps of change to gain confidence to try it on their own. Here are some suggestions on what you can do differently during your time together to promote change.

1. Do Relationships Differently.

Relationships have tremendous redemptive power. People are used to a certain pattern of relationship, both in the ways they relate to and what they expect of others. When you relate differently with your clients, that becomes a corrective experience shifting their perceptions about themselves and others.

- Give them surprising grace. Grace that is different than what their behavior would naturally elicit or they would expect.
- Encourage and enable them to do something different. For example, if they never confront, get them to speak honestly about something they didn't like about your approach and then resolve it.

2. Focus Attention Differently.

When people come to you for help with their problems, it is easy to pay attention and focus on the dysfunctional and negative parts of their lives. Make sure to also acknowledge the positives and areas of growth. Even though clients are likely to dismiss it as nothing, don't be quick to move on. Linger and emphasize what they have done well and how they were able to do it. Reinforce the new pattern.

- Ask them to recount how it felt to do the new thing. What made them able to do it. Celebrate it.
- Have them imagine what it might be like to do the thing they wish they could. Have them explore their feelings, body sensations, etc.

3. Do History Differently.

It is important to understand the history of suffering and patterns of sin in clients' lives, but also focus on the evidence of grace in their stories. In your history gathering, ask about and highlight their strengths and successes despite the hard things in their lives. Discuss the people who showed them love.

- Do a timeline of their lives. Notice when and how there were positive evidences of grace and growth in their lives. Reinforce their resilience and strengths.
- Say, “Despite all that, you’ve been able to ...”

4. Do Body Differently.

People carry their feelings, trauma and behavioral patterns, in their bodies. Have them do something different with their bodies both in and out of counseling times.

- For people who have a collapsed posture due to shame, gently encourage them to sit up and practice an open posture. Have them explore how it feels in their bodies.
- For those with a lot of anxiety, help them breathe deeply and practice reducing tension in their bodies.

5. Talk Differently.

People’s entrenched emotional and thought patterns also come out in the way they speak. Help them continue to express themselves honestly, but in a different way than they would on their own. These practices help bring a sense of mastery over their emotions rather than being overcome by them.

- Instead of just venting, have your clients be mindful to observe and reflect on what it is that they are feeling and expressing.
- For anxious, fast talkers, have them slow down their speech. Rather than ruminating on things that make them anxious, help them to observe and name their anxieties.
- Invite them to bring God into their stories.

6. Experience God Differently.

It begins with doing your relationship with your clients differently (#1). Then, as your clients experience your grace as an extension of God’s grace, help them to also experience God differently in the moment themselves.

- Instead of just talking about God, have your clients talk out loud to God in your time together, especially when their emotions are stirred or they have just gained insight.
- Use meditation and visualization to help them experience aspects of God that are new or relevant. For a great example of this, refer to our December 2018 newsletter tool, “Using Imagination to Internalize the Gospel.”

As your clients learn to do a little slice of life differently during your sessions together, encourage them to continue practicing those changes in their day-to-day lives.