

Yet Another Universal Question: Small Key to Brief Therapy and Self-Help

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Introduction: Part of a case description

Like all CoLec (Conversations Led by Clients) techniques (Panayotov, Strahilov, 2019), this language tool was stolen from a client in a real life conversation with her (Panayotov, 2011).

It came into being at 11.16 AM on 07 December 2020. A Masters' degree ergo-therapy student at the Rousse University held a training therapeutic/counseling session with a client as a part of her homework assignment of her Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) and Conversations Led by Clients (CoLeC) training course.

This is what happened 3 min. 22 sec. into the session:

...

T: *What do you think that today, at this very moment, is the most useful thing for you that you can discuss with me?*

C: *The most important thing for me now, is that I want to live 100% of my life, while for the time being I feel like living only about 20% of it... but I can raise it up to 25% if I start doing morning exercises, walking half an hour daily in the park, and start listening to my old favorite music again.*

T: *What else can you do to raise it up to 25% of the life you want to live?*

C: *Nothing, that's fine for me now.*

The therapist/student wrote down a prescription:

- Rp./*
- 1. Morning Exercises;*
 - 2. Walking in the park half an hour daily;*
 - 3. Listening to my old favorite music;*
 - 4. ...*

T (handing the prescription to the Client): *Here is your reminder on how you get up to 25% of what you want your life to be. You can do these till the next time we meet... and please add to this list anything else that you may think of...*

The therapist wished the client the best of luck and sent her on her way. The session lasted less than 7 minutes.

So in response to the MAQ (Mind-Activating Question) the client in this session came up with a narrative statement, implicitly suggesting that the two most useful question for her are: *‘What part of the life that I want to live do I actually live right now?’* and *‘How can I improve my life quality by 5%?’* A month later the client called the therapist on the phone and reported that she feels much better and has decided on the next steps of improving further her life. In this call she said that she is at 30% of what she wants her life to be, and then defined the next steps she will undertake to improve it even better – start bicycling in the park and around the city when the weather allows this, and doing a trip to the Caribbean islands when this becomes possible (with severe pandemic restrictions being still effective across Europe and worldwide at the time).

Early Usage and Observations on Clients’ Reactions

So we started using these questions with many clients:

- *If 100% stands for the life you want to live, what percent of it do you think you are living now?*
- *What part of the life you want to live do you think you are living now?*
- *Is this Okay with you having in mind all the limitations this situation sets for you?*
- *So how can you keep on this level of living?*
- *What will make you say that you are 1 or 2 percent higher?*

After using different modifications and improvisations of this tool with about 100 clients until now, 18 January 2021, we can see a kind of unanimous reactions to it:

- The questions are readily graspable by almost all clients;
- No useless misunderstandings or confused answers have been noticed so far;
- The questions quickly get answers either in per cent numbers, or in parts of a whole;
- The common reaction is that upon hearing the questions, most people start thinking about how to increase the percent of their lives they feel like living now;
- Individually appropriate plans of action emerge as a common consequence to this;
- It is not unusual that using some of these question makes therapy not only single-session, but also
- Single-question with
- The average session time being less than half an hour.

Discussion

The student/therapist used here a variation of the Mind-Activating Question (Mikhalski, Panayotov & MacDonald, 2019, Strahilov & Panayotov, 2020). It permits clients organize their therapeutic conversations with professionals the ways they find useful and appropriate to their situations (Switek, 2014).

Similar to many Conversations Led by Clients, this one was not only Single-Session, but also Single-Question, and lasted for just a few minutes. The client, however, was satisfied with the results, as she confirmed on the phone a month later.

In a pandemic situation like this one today (as of 18 January 2021), we can imagine that it is an universal situation for us all on this planet to live right now some (small) percentage of the lives we want to live. Most of the information about a pandemic is stated in numbers and percents. So it makes sense asking any of our clients, and ourselves, too:

‘What part of the life that I/You want to live do I/You actually live right now?’

... and then, of course, if it is the right percent, adequate to the situation, it is Okay. The obvious next question would be ***‘How can I/you maintain this level of living till the end of this situation?’***

If, however, one thinks that ***‘I would like to live a bit better now?’***, we can ask the obvious:

‘What do you think will tell you that you live a little bit better, by one or two per cent?’

Being a scaling improvisation (de Shazer, 1988), this question reflects a very common way of thinking and talking in a pandemic situation, when almost all human activities are by definition restricted and limited to some, hopefully measurable, extent.

Interestingly enough, this kind of scaling the situation is single-ended, with 100% standing for the final goal, and lacking a low-end or ‘problem’ definition. This sets the stage for a ‘problem-free’ conversation with the client.

Even without viral attacks, however, one can always make a ‘calculation’ of what part of one’s life s/he lives now, and make a decision if one wants to do something about it, and what in particular.

An important characteristic of this tool is its normalizing effect, as it implies *‘we all live some (small) part of what we want, so you are not alone in this’*.

Conclusion

No matter if you, dear reader, are a therapist fond of Single-Session or Brief Therapy, or just a person feeling that some restraints are imposed on you right now by certain life circumstances, you can always take advantage of using these therapeutic/self-help tools, if you wish:

- ***What part of the life that I want to live do I actually live right now?***
- ***If the part I define is Okay with me right now:***
 - ☞ ***How can I keep it going?***
- ***If ‘I would like to live a bit better than this now’:***
 - ☞ ***What might increase this percent by 1 or 2?***
- ***And then act upon the answers I have given to this question.***

Statement: Without any guarantees about their usefulness in your particular case, it is 100% guaranteed that you cannot get any harm from using these questions. The *Primum Non Nocere* principle is ensured, as with all CoLeC instruments.

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