



Module Fourteen: Making a Plan

Once you have explored what a person wants and have asked the powerful questions, hopefully your client is ready to do something different. He or she realizes that what they have been doing isn't working to get them what they want. If this didn't happen and in the client's self-evaluation he or she determined what they were doing was working just fine and there was no need to change anything, then wish them well, always leaving the door open for them to return should they want to.

When someone believes what they are doing is working, he or she will not be willing to make any type of plan to do something different. Nagging will not do it. Threatening them will not do it. Wish them well and do not get in the way of whatever the consequences are. Do not intervene on behalf of your client. You can go back to your client if you have new information to give but short of that, allow them to live out the choices they have made. Whose life is it anyway? Who has to live with the consequences of their choices? How can you know what could possibly be better for another person? You experience the world from two different places with vastly different Total Knowledge and Valuing Filters. Allow clients to do what they believe will be best for them and support them in that right. Then, should things not work out so well, they will be willing to come back to you because you didn't burn any bridges with them.

If, on the other hand, your client has evaluated that change is needed, there are really two parts to making the plan. The first involves exploring all the options and the second involves making actual plan he or she intends to follow.

Exploring the Options:

Exploring options is about accessing the person's Behavioral/Creative System to find out what behaviors the person has available. Questions might sound like:

What else could you do to get what you want?

Have you considered anything that would move you closer to your goal?

What have you thought of doing?

What might work better than what you've been doing?

Can you think of anything else to try?

The idea in asking these questions is to see if the client can come up with his or her own plan. You increase the possibility of follow-through when there is ownership of the plan. The best way to get ownership is if the client comes up with the plan on his or her own.

What can happen as you explore options is:

The client has a plan and is ready to move forward with it.

The client has several ideas of what might work and is undecided about which is best.

The client has no idea at all what to do.

Your response will be different depending upon which scenario you encounter. Should the client already have a singular plan in mind, you can attempt to talk to him or her about alternative but most people, when they think they have the solution, won't be interested in trying anything else until they learn their solution won't work. If you have information that will help them evaluate their solution will not work, then by all means, share it with them. If they consider what you say, then you will move into one of the other two scenarios. However, if a client stays fixed on one solution, your best approach is to not fight it. Help the client think it through from every angle and then allow them to implement their plan. If, in the implementation, it doesn't work, your client will most likely return to you to discuss other alternatives. And who knows? It just might work and then the problem will be solved!

When clients have multiple options available to them, then you want to help them brainstorm, thinking of as many choices as possible. You do not judge any of the options until they are all out on the table. If you have some to add to the list, by all means add them, but do not give any more weight to one over the other. At this point, they are just ideas. Once the brainstorming has ended, you will guide the client in a systematic consideration of the benefits and the tradeoffs of each choice. Then step back and allow your client to choose the best option for him or her.

Should you find yourself in the scenario where the client has absolutely no idea of what to do next, then is it all right for you to make suggestions? Of course it is. How can a person know what they don't know? If a client has completely exhausted their repertoire of behaviors, then they are looking to you for answers. I do, however, have a strong word of caution here. We already discussed it in Lesson 11 about Creating a Need-Satisfying Environment. If you are called upon for solutions and plans, then you must give at least three options.

Remember, one is advice and that is never good. Two options feels like a dilemma or ultimatum. But three choices allows the clients to consider his or her options and still make the best choice, thus ensuring the choice becomes his or her own.

I use two models of providing three options when I am struggling to come up with them. One is: You can keep doing it exactly the way you are. You can do it better or you can do it worse. And then we talk about specifically what each of those options look like, as well as their possible

outcomes. Another model that works particularly well when looking at relationships and job situations is this: You can change it, accept it, or leave it. We then spend time going over the specifics of each option and their consequences.

Creating the Plan:

There are several things to consider when making the actual plan. The first is to be as certain as you can be that the client is really ready to make a plan. Sometimes, counselors rush to a plan before the client is really ready. How will you know when your client is ready? When you get a sincere, honest self-evaluation from the client that what he or she has been doing isn't working.

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Simple. The plan should be easy to do. Sometimes we can cause paralysis in our clients when we create convoluted plans that have too many big steps. The client is unable to do the plan in the time allowed. When the goal is so big, sometimes clients don't make progress because they simply don't know where to begin.

Attainable. The plan should be something the person is capable of doing. It shouldn't be out of a person's reach but it should be enough of a stretch that the person feels a sense of challenge and accomplishment when finished.

Measurable. How will you and the client know if the plan has been completed if it isn't stated in measureable terms? When making a plan, ask yourself, "How will I know that the client has been successful?"

Specific. A good plan clearly spells out who is going to do what by when. There is nothing left to chance. All the loop holes are tightened up.

Immediate. A good plan is something the client can begin to do as soon as he or she leaves the counseling session. It shouldn't be something that has to wait.

Positive. A good plan describes what the client will begin to do, not what he or she is going to stop doing. As stated previously, there is no energy around a "stop doing" plan. And if you haven't created a positive plan for what the client wants to do while they aren't doing the thing they want to stop, then you have created a failure plan. "What are they going to do instead?" is the question you want to ask if they want to stop doing something.

Repetitive. Research shows it takes 30 days to create a new habit. Therefore, if you want your client to learn a new way of being, you want them to perform the plan every day for at least 30 days. Make the plan something that can be done daily and builds on previous skills.

Non-contingent. Make sure your client's plan does not depend on the cooperation of anyone else. When clients make plans that involve the cooperation of other people, it adds variables to the equation that will provide excuses for why the plan didn't work. Then the client takes no responsibility for the failure of the plan.

If this is the first time you've made a plan with this particular client, then you will be starting from scratch. But if you have a history with this client and you know there have been things that stood in the way of success in the past, then you will want to have a portion of the plan dedicated to addressing what has created problems before. For example, if you know your client is highly susceptible to peer pressure, then you will want to build strategies into the plan for managing peer pressure.

When you and your client feel good about the plan and you are reasonably assured of its success, get a commitment from your client. This can be verbal, a handshake, a pound or any other culturally acceptable agreement that both of you are committed to the plan's success.

Conclusion:

Your assignment this week is to work with someone on creating a plan. The easiest and perhaps, most significant, would be making a plan with yourself to address something you have been wanting to change in your life. Use the worksheet, Making a Plan to first, write down your plan. And then check the boxes underneath to be certain you have included all necessary elements. If not, rewrite the plan on the second page with the missing elements included.