

Article 22

En-Trancing People Who Are a Pain and the Bullies in Your Clients' Brains

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Like the mythical, two-faced god Janus, the first program, “Using Hypnotic Language in Everyday Life,” poises people to deal with difficult characters by using hypnotic syntax to promote desirable conduct. The second workshop, “Semi-Hypnotic Self-Talk for Briefer, Deeper Therapy,” looks inward to identify thought demons and makes use of thinking processes to mindfully observe and ask questions that derail subvocal monologues. In both presentations, overbearing people or undermining thoughts are entranced, but hypnotic trance never occurs. This use of evocative language ventures into uncharted territory in the social and psychic realms and offers fertile soil to cultivate compelling counseling interventions. The rest of this paper will make those clear.

I. Teaching Clients to Deal With Difficult People

Often it is difficult to focus on intra-psychic issues because clients bring their “war stories” of problems they are having with spouses, children, in-laws, and co-workers to sessions. In a troubled relationship or a dysfunctional family, the parties that seem to need

help the most frequently refuse to come for treatment. While this may leave counselors feeling helpless, an important reframe is needed. Murray Bowen (1978), the originator of Family Systems Therapy, believed that the most productive work could be done with the healthiest member of the family and that is frequently the person most likely to seek treatment.

Bowen had the foresight to realize that anytime a person takes a stand that goes against the prevailing beliefs of a system, threats, attacks, name calling, and other types of *emotional reactivity* must occur. He recommended that people maintain contact with the system while under attack with casual responses and he gave some fine examples of such rejoinders. But he did little to define or expand them into an arsenal of responses that allow people to stay connected to adversaries while under fire with empowering grace.

Sources for Empowering, Casual Responses

The part of this paper that deals with difficult people codifies a set of skills inspired by two main sources: (1) Taoism shows the way of using opposing forces to find harmony and balance. Along with Buddhism and Zen, it inspired the martial art of *aikido* which absorbs an adversary's energy. (2) Hypnosis and hypnotic language is the practical source that shows how to evoke desired responses in people or disrupt habitual patterns of behavior.

People frequently use hypnosis in their everyday language with undesirable outcomes. Saying, "Don't ever *lie to me again*," is an order that provokes resistance with an (*italicized*) embedded suggestion to be deceitful. The alternative, "You can *always*... tell me the truth," is a statement of fact or a truism with an embedded suggestion that encourages honesty. Orders provoke instinctive, *fight/flight* reactions. A truism is a *flow* response. Once learned, it is surprisingly easy to execute. The overall strategy is to eliminate resistance with hypnotic or verbal aikido responses. There are four main tactics to this strategy. The fine nuances of each one will be underlined, illustrated, and defined in the following sections.

Four Types of Casual Responses

Acting-As-If

Acting-as-if is the verbal art that confirms the best in people by treating a harsh comment as if it were harmless. We have come a long way from Art Linkletter's *House Party* where kids said the darndest things. We now live in a Jerry Springer world where even our friends can say the darndest things that are anything but cute. Suppose a frenemy said to you, "*It's amazing that you were picked to speak at the ACA conference. Just be careful not to bore people.*" This remark is rife with not-so-hidden rudeness. Several acting-as-if responses would remove the veiled barbs.

1. *Why thank you for your heartfelt confidence in me. Saying thank you is the easiest way to handle any cruel comment. The reply is unexpected and responds to insolence with etiquette, throwing people off their game. Suggesting that the person has heartfelt confidence is called "speaking things as you want them." It undermines the insinuation that you might be boring and takes it as a compliment.*
2. *You're such a good friend for giving me that reminder, but I've already got "don't bore people" on my packing list. This casual response starts by complimenting the instigator, which is always disarming. The compliment is then negated with the hypnotic word *but* that discounts whatever comes before it. Putting *don't bore people* on a fictional packing list is the tactic of agreeing with an opponent in fact or theory, which eliminates resistance.*
3. *Actually, I have been known to bore people to death. It's one of my special powers that I reserve for certain occasions. This reply can best be thought of as dramatizing the worst-case scenario to embrace an insult. In this case a "golden nugget" of truth or greatness is also found by being able to turn on special powers at a whim.*

Asking Questions

Asking questions, or the Art of Inquiry, is the most natural of the verbal arts. On some level, it does not make sense for people to make random, rude remarks. If stress did not get in the way, curiosity would be roused. All questions have the effect of taking the spotlight off victims, forcing instigators to look at themselves and start a focused inward search. This basic tenet of hypnosis is illustrated in the following inquiries.

1. *Actually, I'm curious. Why are you amazed that I was picked to speak at the conference?* This simple, open-ended question exposes the assumption about qualifications and puts the frenemy on the spot. In such situations people will often deny presumptions or admit them more meekly and leave avenues open for other casual comments.
2. *I wonder why you're amazed that I'm speaking at the conference.* This hidden question is posed in the form of a statement with the words *I wonder*. It does not require a response, plants ideas to ponder, and implies that there is nothing surprising about being chosen.
3. *Are you trying to keep me on my toes or build my confidence?* This question creates a false choice between two acceptable alternatives rather than trying to fathom the reason for rudeness. In a sense, it speaks things as the person wants them by assuming that the frenemy is looking out for her best interest.

A false choice puts people in a bind —*heads I win, tails you lose*. A double bind creates a forced choice that assumes success: *Do you know how this paper will help you think of new counseling interventions?* Regardless of how the question is answered, there is a covert agreement that the paper will be of assistance.

Active Listening

Active listening is familiar to counselors from the work of Carl Rogers (1951) when he introduced his single-point

(nondirective) method. In the interest of making casual comments while under fire, it will be looked at from the Taoist perspective of the Mirror Mind that reflects but does not absorb verbal attacks (Lao Tzu, 1972). Thus, the Art of Understanding is not only a meditation on another person's experience, but it offers protection from personalizing insults by seeing through to underlying issues:

1. *You're suggesting my news is unexpected and you want to caution me.* Instead of rephrasing with the usual, "I hear you saying..." a hypnotic video talk is used to narrate verbal process with words like "You're wondering, pointing out, recommending, remembering, hinting, and so on.
2. *It makes sense that you're warning me not to be boring since that is the biggest worry of many people with a fear of public speaking.* The listener validates the speaker's emotional logic whether or not it is reasonable.
3. *You're surprised that I was picked and apprehensive about how I'll perform.* This is deep listening that requires empathy or seeing into (*em*—Latin) the feelings (*pathos*—Greek) of others.

Hypnosis and Humor

All of the above comments contain elements of hypnosis that bypass resistance and evoke involuntary responses. The third *as-if* response uses humor because an absurd or unexpected connection is made between the cliché of boring people to death and its literal meaning. The examples of a truism, embedded suggestion, bind, and double bind above are outright hypnotic verbiage. More complex evocative language follows.

1. *Keep thinking of all the ways I might mess-up (while presenting), because over-confidence killed the cat.* Advanced hypnotic ploys encourage undesirable behavior in order to place it under the speaker's control. This is called utilization and is more commonly known as reverse psychology. An incorrect cliché subliminally focuses on curiosity, rather than confidence.

2. *While we bite into this scrumptious desert, lets both see if we can dare to... remember giving a talk without the bother of worrying.* A serial suggestion starts with an easy, currently occurring behavior and links it to a more difficult task. Dare is a hypnotic word because it draws attention to and challenges the listener to endorse a difficult concept.
3. *When you remember to ... forget about worrying me, you can take another bite of this delicious dessert.* An implied directive is the opposite of a serial suggestion. A command (*forget about worrying me*) is tied to an easy, almost involuntary behavior to signal readiness to comply. Using paired opposites (*remember to forget*) sneaks in a suggestion by focusing on one end of the polarity.

The four tactics, Acting-As-If, Asking Questions, Active Listening, and Humor and Hypnosis, can be remembered by the acronym AA²H. It suggests an expression that breathes enlightenment into any tense moment. Responding to difficult people with casual comments offers a shortcut to self esteem and empowerment. However, when people are overwhelmed with a cacophony of inner voices, they may not be able to execute these maneuvers.

II. Teaching Clients to Deal With Distressing Thoughts

Madelyn came to counseling under the onus of dealing with a hypercritical mother who had recently chastised her for not helping with a family barbecue. Simply attempting to role-play the words, “You sound upset with me,” had triggered a flood of tears and such thoughts as—*The entire welfare of the family depends on me; I cannot trust my own judgment; My mom knows what is best for me;* and so on (Cohen-Posey, 2008b).

Even the frenemy’s remark in Part I is suspect. Few people have friends of any sort who would express amazement that they were speaking at a conference and caution them not to be boring. Those ideas are more likely to have been generated by an inner critic that rambles in a non-stop fashion:

I can't believe they picked me to speak... I'll probably bore everyone... Maybe I won't make any sense... What if I won't be able to answer people's questions... They might think my ideas are too far out... and on and on.

It would seem that cognitive therapy would be the treatment of choice to confront these automatic thoughts. However, this approach uses the person of the therapist to challenge disturbing ideas and restructure them. Semi-hypnotic self-talk begins in a similar fashion by identifying faulty thinking, but three intermediary steps are taken to distance people from their beliefs before addressing them.

Distancing People From Disturbing Thoughts

1. *Speaking in the second person.* Non-stop (subvocal) monologues like the ones above are voiced in the first person. We mistake our thoughts for ourselves. The first step to creating distance is to rephrase disturbing thoughts in the second person. *I'll bore everyone* becomes *You'll bore everyone*. Thoughts turn into objects to be faced.
2. *Naming thoughts.* Turning thoughts into objects poses the questions: What or who are these mental elements that are being faced? They are easily recognized by such names as Inner Critic, People Pleaser, or Terrorist that cries, "What if this..., What if that..."
3. *Representing thoughts.* Once thoughts have been isolated and have an identity, they can be further objectified with images and everyday items. Edvard Munch's famous painting, *The Scream*, is a perfect portrait for an Inner Terrorist that predicts catastrophes. A Halloween witch can symbolize an Inner Critic and a cute stuffed puppy dog can stand for a People Pleaser. When all else fails, an emoticon such as /8-[can portray a pushy inner voice saying, "*You haven't done enough.*"

Once these steps have been taken, a person has begun to dis-identify from disturbing thoughts. Roberto Assagioli, the founder of Psychosynthesis (1965/2000) said people are ruled by the things with which they identify (their thoughts). They can control inner voices from which they dis-identify.

Identifying with Resourceful Thought Processes

When the bond between beliefs and Being is broken, one's true identity can be revealed. *I think, therefore I am*, becomes, *I have thoughts and I AM the observer of those thoughts*. This is the *I AM* that is the witness of distressing thoughts. It is an inner resource that can mindfully observe beliefs and make inquiries for the sake of curiosity, not to force change. Therapists begin to help clients discover this inner resource with three steps.

1. *Asking questions* to recognize resourceful thought processes. Have you ever heard a still small voice that kept you going in the midst of a crisis? When have you been surprised by your courage, calm, or creativity? Tell me about that. What has helped you get through your worst moments?
2. *Representing thinking processes* that are observant, intuitive, reasonable, flexible, and compassionate with illustrations or figures. Images can easily be found and printed with a Google image search: *The Hands of God and Man* (Michelangelo), the Scales of Justice, a soaring eagle, a flowering rose, or the yin/yang symbol. The curious, unflappable Winnie the Pooh wonderfully embodies Being that just IS (Hoff, 1982). Angels or a compass can symbolize guiding spirits.
3. *Naming Thinking Processes*. Clients can readily find words to label these thinking processes—Knower, Reason, Intuition, Witness, Observer, or Presence. When all else fails, the words *True Self* or *Self* can be used to distinguish the originator of compassionate observations and inquiries from thoughts that criticize, warn, and pressure.

Hypnotic Observations and Inquiries

The stage is now set to coach clients to make observations and inquiries that en-trance disturbing thoughts. A negative thought has been re-worded in the second person: *You'll bore everyone*. Perhaps it comes from a fretful, piglet part. The counselor can ask this person's "Knower" to go inside and silently say to the fretful part, *You're making a prediction that gives Kate a tight stomach*. This is the same as the narrating verbal processes tactic under active listening in Part I. The consequence of the maladaptive thought is also pointed out. This hypnotic video-talk feeds back exactly what is happening in order to establish credibility and rapport, and to narrow a person's focus of attention. A constricted focus of attention is one definition of trance (O'Hanlon, 1992). The client reports back anything she hears from within.

To further the dialogue, the Knower can ask the fretful part questions: *What is the chance of everyone being bored? Where do you think that worry comes from? Would anything bad happen if you stopped giving Kate warnings? Are you trying to help?* Questions continue a focused inward search. At some point clients will report that they do not hear anything, which is usually experienced as relief from constant mind chatter. It is important that questions and observations suggested by counselors be repeated silently by clients. Subvocal verbiage energizes the frontal lobes of the cortex that become dominant during meditation (Cohen-Posey, 2008a). The following is an example of a dialogue that unfolded with a young, overweight girl that we'll call Chyanne. Responses for the Self were suggested by her counselor:

Shy Part: *People are always looking at you in the lunch room.*

Self: What's bad about people looking at Chyanne?

Part: *They're judging her.*

Self: What are their judgments?

Part: *They think she is stupid and a waste of space.*

Self: That's pretty harsh. Do you look to see if they're scowling as they judge? You got pretty quiet. Are you OK? Are you going to keep your eyes down or look around and see if people are watching Chyanne?

Part: *Someone has to protect her.*

Self: Are you protecting her or scaring her?

Chyanne: It's quiet for now. That feels better.

Counselor: How do you feel towards that shy part?

Chyanne: I'm tired of her. I start doing better and then she pops up. I wish she'd get over herself.

Counselor: So a controlling part inside is trying to order her to grow up....

The work continues: the object is not to rid Chyanne of her shyness, but to help her recognize the notions that trigger it and to separate those maladaptive beliefs from calming, empowering thought processes. A sure sign of detachment from distressing ideas occurs when they can be looked at with compassion, goodwill, and even humor. Chyanne's counselor will continue to feed her Self observations and inquiries that yield other moments of quiet clarity.

It is apparent that dialogue with disturbing thoughts is different from the casual comments that can quash quarrels in social arenas. The inner bullies of the psychic realm can become tyrants who require a special diplomacy. This is possible once illuminating powers of observation and inquiry are revived.

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