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## Article 48

# **Engage the Brain: Using Writings, Movement, and Creativity to Increase Effectiveness**

Paper based on a program presented at the 2010 American Counseling Association Conference, March 18-22, Pittsburgh, PA

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## **Introduction**

Pat Love, the first president of IAMFC, once said, “The brain likes novelty.” This is true and yet counselors still primarily conduct “talk-listen” therapy. This article emphasizes the importance of being innovative during counseling and how the use of creative techniques can improve effectiveness. Counselors need to think of ways to engage the brain just as advertisers try to engage our brains when watching commercials on television. The advertiser’s goal is to engage our brain to the point of making a change. This is what counselors ideally try to do—engage our client’s brain in order to have an impact. There are a variety of creative techniques that counselors can use (Gladding, 2005; Haley, 1986; Jacobs, 1992; Jacobs, 1994; Mosak & Maniaci, 1998). Counselors are encouraged to explore these resources plus many others and find techniques that fit their counseling style. Additionally, counselors are encouraged to think like advertisers and find creative ways to dramatize points during a session. Excellent techniques to have in a counseling “tool box” include creative techniques that involve writing or drawing and movement.

There is a great deal of literature highlighting the emphasis that understanding learning styles is important across disciplines. (Gadzella & Masten, 1998; Horton & Oakland, 1997). Whether it be in education or counseling, the more parts of the brain a

teacher or counselor can access, the greater likelihood that a concept or intervention will be remembered. Beaulieu (2003) states:

When we talk with our clients, we are engaging only a fraction of the sensory resources of the mind, involving the auditory sense, yes, but neglecting the other senses. When words fail, recruitment of other senses can help break through to another level of involvement, so that the therapist can have real impact on the client. (p. 69)

Writings, drawings and movement access more parts of the brain because the client either has the concept visually in front of him on a whiteboard, flipchart, or legal pad, or he has to move out of his seat. By using these novel techniques, the brain tends to engage more and the chances are greater that important material from a session will be understood and remembered. In our opinion, multisensory counseling is much more effective than just talk-listen counseling.

One valuable tool in a counselor's office is a large whiteboard or a flipchart. Often the counselor stands at the board and writes out or draws various concepts. At times, the client goes to the board. A number of techniques using writings and drawings are described in the next few pages.

## **Writings**

### **Not True –True Grid**

Clients often tell themselves things that are not true; the counseling process entails helping the clients tell themselves the truth (Ellis & MacLaren, 1998; Greenberger & Pedesky, 1995) An effective way to visually represent this is to use a Not True—True grid. The benefit of this is that the client sees his irrational statements and the counselor can point out that these thoughts need to be disputed. The dialogue would go something like the session below with the counselor writing the not true sentences on the whiteboard or flipchart:

| <i>Not True</i>                         | <i>True</i>   |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------|
| <i>I'll never be happy again.</i>       |               |
| <i>I'll never find another partner.</i> |               |
| <i>I'm going to be alone forever.</i>   |               |
| <i>I have nothing going for me.</i>     |               |
| <i>I'm a failure.</i>                   |               |
| <i>Bad/ Worthless</i>                   | <i>Better</i> |

Counselor: (Going to the whiteboard) Let me show you this grid. I think it will make crystal clear what is going on with you. You have things that you tell yourself that are either Not True or True. I'm going to write down what you are telling yourself as a result of your divorce. I'm going to put your thoughts in either the Not True or True column and at the bottom write down your feeling of

“depressed/worthless” under the Not True column and “better” under the True column.

Counselor: What do you see when you look at this grid?

Client: Why are those things all under the not true column? That’s what I tell myself.

Counselor: I’m not saying you don’t say those things to yourself. I’m saying they are not true. What do you notice about the True column?

Client: There’s nothing there.

Counselor: That’s my point. We have to get something there. We have to dispute your not true statements. All I’m trying to do is get you to tell yourself the truth.

Client: (Staring at the board) But I tell myself this stuff all day long.

Counselor: Before we are done, we’re going to dispute each of those sentences and have something true in its place. For instance for the last one, the truth is your marriage failed but that has nothing to do with your personhood—**you** are not a failure.

The counselor uses the completion of the grid as the basis for the rest of the session and would write the more rational, truthful statements in the True column.

### **Lists**

Listing is an excellent writing technique. In sessions where a talkative client is bringing up a variety of concerns, going to the board and listing the concerns serves a couple of purposes. First, it slows the client down because the counselor is now at the board writing out the list of concerns and the client sees the topics. Second, the counselor can ask which of the topics is most important or say “Let’s rank these topics in order of concern or importance.” This technique helps to focus the session and tends to stop the client’s story-telling. Lists of characteristics of a friend, love partner, or boss, or possible solutions to a problem situation are usually helpful because the client can visualize options and possibilities.

### **Ratings 1-10**

The concrete technique of rating people or situations on a 1-10 scale and then writing that on the board can be helpful.

Counselor: On a 1-10 scale with 10 being the best Dad ever, what would you rate your dad?

Client: I want him to be at least an 8.

Counselor: But what **is** he, given that his drinking has gotten worse and he’s caught up in this new relationship.

Client: Heck, he’s about a 2 or 3.

Counselor: Goes to the board and writes:

*Dad = 2 I wish he was an 8.*

Client: (Staring at the board.) Just seeing that is disturbing—I don't want him to be a 2.

Counselor: But sadly, he is. (Client is still staring at the board.)

Another way this can be used is to list various people in the client's life and then rate them so that the client can see who she's around and why her life feels negative. The board could end up looking like this:

|                  |                                        |
|------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <i>Dad</i>       | <i>4</i>                               |
| <i>Mom</i>       | <i>2</i>                               |
| <i>Tony</i>      | <i>4</i>                               |
| <i>Shara</i>     | <i>4</i>                               |
| <i>Co-worker</i> | <i>3</i>                               |
| <i>Boss</i>      | <i>4</i>                               |
| <i>Susie</i>     | <i>8 and she lives 1000 miles away</i> |

### **Sentences to Be Disputed**

Clients often say things that serve as important beliefs that guide their lives (Adler, 1958; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964 ). Writing these sentences out enforces that the idea has to be changed in order for the client to make progress. Here are some examples.

*I don't deserve to be happy.*

*God would never forgive me.*

*I am a terrible person.*

By having one or more “guiding fictions” written out, the counselor can keep referring back to the statement; having it there visually helps to fire more neurons in the brain.

### **Drawings**

Drawings help counselors make concepts more concrete. Listed on the next few pages are a number of useful drawings.

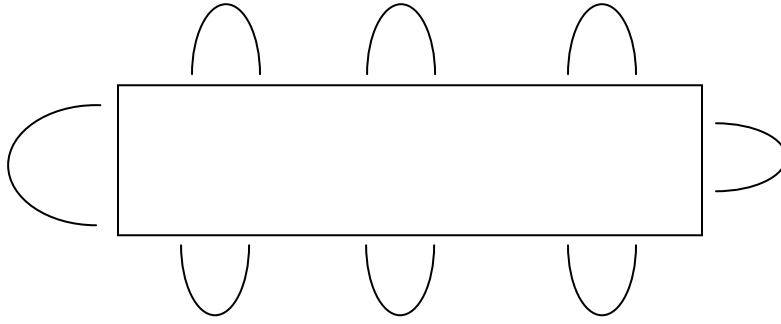
#### **Board of Directors**

This is a useful drawing that gets a client to understand himself better.

Counselor: Do you know what a board of directors is?

Client: Yeah.

Counselor: We're going to figure out your personal board of directors. Everyone has a board of directors—I do, you do, everyone does. The people on your board can be alive or dead. (Counselor draws a diagram symbolizing a board table with some chairs.)



Counselor: This is your board and we're going to fill in who sits on your board. Often it's parents, siblings, spouse, boss, friends, etc. We're going to try to figure out who you listen to when you are trying to make a big decision. From what you've told me, your meetings would be chaotic—almost like World War III. We also have to figure out who is chairperson of your board.

Client: I hate to say it but my mom is probably the chairperson. I am always trying to please her. That's why it is so hard for me to think of taking the job so far away.

Counselor: I agree, I think you do have your mom as chair and that's what makes this so hard. Let's keep going. Who else is on your board—who do you listen to?

Client: My dad, my sister, my pastor; three good friends. (Counselor fills in the drawing with names.)

Counselor: Do these people understand the company—do they understand you? How much do they know of all the changes you're making as a result of counseling and the personal growth weekends you've been going to? I think your friends understand you, but do the other members of the board?

Client: Many know very little. No wonder I'm screwed up. When I look at my board, it's no wonder I'm conflicted.

Counselor: Let's consider this: there may be some on your board of directors you need to fire. And firing does not mean not speaking to them; it just means they no longer have the influence that they currently have. First, let's start with who do you want to be the chair of your board?

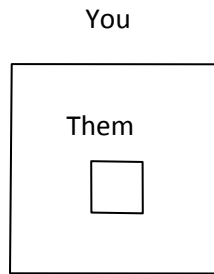
The counselor would use this concept and drawing to help the client see how he is being influenced and the changes that he may want to consider making.

### **Small Box—Big Box**

Some clients talk about how their parents or partners want them to fit into a life that is too simple or “small” for them and the counselor wants to keep referring to this concept. The dialogue would go something like this:

Counselor: I think what is happening is your parents live in a small box and you live in a much larger box, or view of the world. They are trying to get you to fit into their box while you want them to stretch their view so that their box is similar

in size to yours. Does this look like the problem? (Counselor draws a small box and then a large box.)

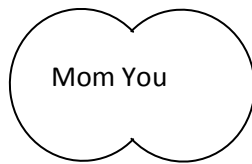


The counselor uses the drawing throughout the session to illustrate and emphasize the issue.

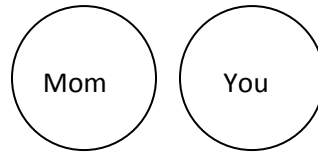
### **Enmeshment Circles**

Some clients are so enmeshed with another person in their life that there is no boundary between them and the other person. A drawing such as the one below is very helpful in making visual how the client needs to establish separate boundaries.

Connected Circles/Unhealthy Relationship

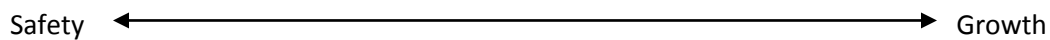


Separate Circles/Healthy Relationship



### **Safety—Growth**

Many clients struggle with wanting to grow and yet they want to feel safe. Drawing this concept on the board helps the client see that they really cannot do both.



### **Movement**

Encouraging clients to get out of their chair and move about is helpful in leaving lasting impressions of therapeutic interventions. What follows is a description of several interventions where movement is used.

### **Client Writing on Whiteboard**

The previous section highlighted the value of writings and drawings. One technique that can be used is to have the client actually come to the board and write out a list or write out a more rational thought or draw a certain concept as opposed to simply

having the counselor complete the drawing. Having the client move helps to break up the mindset of some clients who mainly want to just sit and talk and listen.

### **Changing Seats**

Extra chairs can be used in a variety of ways during a session. Having clients move to different seats is valuable in that they see they have a choice or that counseling is about movement. Listed are some examples of movement where extra chairs are used.

1. The extra chair represents goals— the counselor can have the client stare at the chair and ask if she is willing to work hard to obtain those goals; if the answer is yes, the counselor can have the client stand and move to the other chair. The counselor can then ask what behaviors are needed to reach the goals, have the client go back to her original seat and then talk about what she is currently doing.

2. The extra chair represents rational thinking— the counselor can have the client move between the “rational seat” and the “irrational seat.” This helps to make the client aware that he has a choice to be rational or irrational about the presenting concern. The movement helps to heighten the client’s awareness of what he is experiencing when he has either rational or irrational beliefs about something.

3. The extra chair can represent a person in the client’s life— the counselor can have the client sit in a separate chair and role play the identified person. The counselor can either interview the “other” person or have the client engage in a dialogue between herself and the identified person by switching between the chairs. The counselor could even ask the client to stand in their chair and tower over the other chair which represents how the client towers over her spouse, children, or employees.

There are numerous ways that standing in a chair by either the client or the counselor can effectively be used in a session.

### **Sitting in a Small Chair**

One frequently used prop is the small child’s chair (chair can hold a 200 lb. adult). The small chair is used to represent the part of the client that is hurt, angry, not okay, or irrational. (It is **never** used to humiliate, so the way it is introduced and the timing are very important. When timed appropriately and used correctly, negative reactions to the use of a small chair are rare.)

Counselor: It seems like when you go to talk with your dad, you are not in the seat like you are now with me but rather you slide into the little boy seat. (Counselor pulls up chair.) Does this sound right?

Client: (Sort of laughing, staring at the small chair.) Yeah. I’m 38 years old and I feel like I’m 10 when I go talk to him.

Counselor: Let’s do this. I want you to sit in the small chair and I’m going to stand in this chair representing your dad.

Client: (Moves to the small chair and stares at the counselor standing in the other chair.) Wow, this is exactly how it feels.

Counselor: Come back to your original chair. (Client moves.) Our goal is to help you to stay out of the little chair and to get your dad off the big chair.

Client: I felt so small in that chair. I hate it.

Counselor: I can teach you how to stay out of it.

### **Being Pulled by Small Chair Part**

A small chair can be used to convey the power the little boy or little girl part (i.e., the hurt, angry, not okay, or irrational feelings and thoughts) has over the client. With this technique, the counselor sits in the small chair and reaches out to the client with both hands. When the client takes the counselor's hands, the counselor pulls him towards the small chair. This typically startles the client which leads to a discussion of how this is symbolic of what he is experiencing: the small chair is what governs the client or thwarts him, hence causing him to engage in self-defeating behaviors or thoughts. Ideally, the counselor should have a good rapport established. Furthermore, this technique is most effective when the timing is right and the client needs to be shown how strong his "child part" is. When timed well, this movement technique sticks with the client, especially if the counselor's pull is vigorous enough to startle them.

### **Being Held Back While Trying to Go Forward**

Clients often feel they are being held back by their love partner or their parents.

Counselor: Stand up here and let's assume that going forward to that wall is where you want to be—to reach those goals, more self-esteem. As you try to go forward, I'm going to hold you back. Give me your arm (client does this). Now try to go forward (counselor holds firmly as client struggles to go forward).

Client: This is exactly how it feels—why won't he let me go back to work and school? Why is he so threatened?

Counselor: We've been talking about this for a couple of weeks now. I just want you to experience what is happening.

Client: I hate this. I want him to grow with me and he wants me to be like I was when I met him. Heck, when I met him, I was 17 and lost. I'm now 21 and I don't feel lost. All the counseling and reading has changed me. What do I do—stop growing?

Counselor: Let's look at your choices—you can keep struggling, you can do it his way, or you can pry his hands away (client looks at the counselor's hands).

The counselor can then use this experience to talk about the client's choices. This demonstration typically helps heighten the client's awareness of the nature of the relationship.

### **Client in the Corner**

Clients will, at times, repeat self-defeating behaviors and thought patterns, such as not letting go of the past. They constantly think about their past and bring up their distressing thoughts. To help them see what they are doing to themselves, have clients go to a corner in the room, face the corner and talk about what they see. They report not seeing anything but the corner. Next, ask them to go forward and they can't because they are in the corner. Then ask them to turn around and report what they see. They report



seeing all the things in the room. When asked to move forward, they easily do so. The discussion is then centered on the difference between being in and out of the corner and how the goal of counseling is to get them “out of the corner.” Some clients return the following week and report: “I only got in the corner twice this week it was only for a few minutes each time.”

## **Conclusions**

This article introduced you to a number of creative ways to use writings, drawings, and movement. For each of these areas, there are many more creative interventions that could be described, but the purpose of this article is to get you thinking about creative ways to engage your clients. The brain likes novelty and the more neurons that get fired within the client’s brain, the more likely they will remember the intervention or concept. Multisensory counseling is more effective than talk-listen counseling most of the time.

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