

Soft Hands, Soft Words

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by Rob Williamson

It takes many, many years of practice to learn how to soften your hands when you become a physical therapist. It takes time to build a reflective practice, to explore your values around “fixing”, “healing”, or “cure”. When I first became a physical therapist I was taught to “go in” and perform a big technique and “fix” or “sort out” a shoulder, hip, or rogue meridian. Hopefully, as we mature as therapists we move away from the therapist-as-healer ideal to the principle of the therapist-as-facilitator. We are here to facilitate our client’s transformation process; we are here to support our client to garner the resources to achieve good mental and physical health.

How does this apply to working with trauma?

Trauma can manifest itself both physically and mentally. Some say, myself included, that the two are interdependent. Shamanic cultures describe trauma as the ‘Injury that doesn’t bleed’. You may have recovered from the physical component of a traumatic event but still not yet recovered psycho-emotionally. Where is that injury? How do you access it to support the healing process. Some cultures will use healing rites, energy medicine, physical therapy, pharmaceutical interventions and some will use different forms of talking therapy. These may be used together or separately. Treatments can be gross or subtle, a surgical procedure is a huge intervention which has its own recovery period, whereas energy medicine, say Acupuncture, will have little or no side effects for the person being treated. And so it is for talking therapies, some are gross and some are subtle. Some talking therapies might almost interrogate a client, pinning down a belief or a value system to analyse a historic moment that created a client’s pattern of behaviour, whereas other talking therapies will allow the client the opportunity to explore their own inner workings with little or no interference from the therapist. Some talking therapies go in and “fix” while others facilitate.

Supporting our clients with therapeutic language is one area that a lot of experienced (non-talk based) therapists struggle or shy away from. Dialoguing with our client can sometimes seem clumsy, we can reach an impasse and not know how to move forward, or in a worse case we could say something that “triggers” a client or creates resistance within that therapeutic relationship.

“Clean language” is a very simple set of questions that when used correctly allows the client to explore their own internal belief and value systems without the therapist stepping on the client's therapeutic process, or forcing the client to alter their process to suit the therapist's limited understanding.

Let's look at an example:

In a therapeutic setting your client talks about something they are experiencing. In this case she is working with an image, an image of a clown. She might say, “I see this old part of me; I'm looking at a clown that has entered my room.”

Imagine a therapist then asking the client, “And are you scared?” or “Is it scary?”

Are you as the reader hearing or seeing any alarm bells yet? Who says the clown is scary? Is it perhaps, that, this is how the therapist in this example perceives clowns? Can you see how this could affect the client?

If the client sees the clown as a positive manifestation, questioning that forces the client to explain their experience. This in turn could challenge the client's positive view of clowns, by conforming to the therapist's questioning. This could make the client defensive of further questions when they may already be vulnerable. There could be many more examples specific to this client in this particular example.

If we use questioning that strives to keep the client's experience intact then the client will be able to give his or her own unique experience. This in turn will allow them to further explore their own internal representations. For example, a question that the therapist might have asked would be, “The clown has entered your room, what happens next?”

The client replies, “The clown sits down next to me and we play. She tells me she will always, always be my friend.”

Make sense? If we keep our questioning simple and non-subjective we get much more open and experiential responses from our clients as they experience and give feedback on their own internal representation using metaphor and symbolic language.

So what do we mean when we say symbolic language?

I am predominantly kinaesthetic in the way that I process the world. I have to “try things out”, “sit with an idea for a while”, “get a feeling” for things. So, asking me to put things into words or reflect how they look when asking a question is hard work and almost impossible for me to do. Regardless of how practiced I have become at this, the amount of effort I need to translate my “feelings” into words that suit the therapist working with me means that I start to use more conscious parts of my brain, which takes me away from the piece that I am exploring or working with. As a predominantly kinaesthetic person it takes time for me to work through stuff and I may not have the language of say a visual or auditory oriented person.

The way we ‘sense’ the world around us and within us helps to create our very own symbolic language, the metaphors we use to interact with it. For someone like me that will be through the felt senses, for others it may be predominantly visual, for others auditory. Some clients will work with an image, some with a voice or a sound and others with a feeling.

How do we clean up our language? Well firstly we have to move away from closed Yes/No questions wherever possible. Sometimes, yes/no questions have the effect of pinning our client down by directing the conversation. So, instead of closed questions we have to open up our questioning so as to allow our client the space to explore. Ever had a client who says, “I can’t do imagery”, “Sorry, I’m not feeling anything.” or “I’m no good at talking about this stuff”? One of the most effective ways we can respect our client’s internal representations is by stripping away sensory specific questions. Some examples of sensory specific questions would be:

“How does that feel?”

“What does that look like?”

“What does it sound like?”

Now don’t get me wrong, I might still use these types of questions occasionally, but only if I know the client is predominantly visual in their process or heavily kinaesthetic in the way they experience their body, etc. Until we have built rapport with our client it makes sense to keep our language clean, neutral.

So let’s say this again, “Clean Language” questions are cleansed as far as possible of anything that comes from the therapist’s worldview. They are “neutral”

to the point that they free up the client to describe their experience in whatever way they like. Now this may seem a little daunting as a therapist, there is a strong possibility that we may not get a good sense of what our client is experiencing. But the benefit of the way clean questions work is that we don't actually need to know. We don't need to know "exactly" how someone creates an internal representation. I'll give you another example.

Think of a pink elephant.

Got it? What does it look like? Is it life like, is it a cartoon? Is it bright Pink, is it a natural Pink? Does it have big ears, does it have small ears? Can it talk, can it fly? Is it wearing a suit or a hat? Is it chained, or free? Does it have a smell?

Your representation of an elephant will be completely different to mine or to the next person. How much do we need to know to be able to support a client work with that particular image, that metaphor, that sensation? Clean questioning presupposes that you don't need to know half as much as you think you need to know to help the client explore.

So how do we help our client create a metaphor, how do we get them to really get into their internal representations? Well it couldn't be more simple. We ask our client what that experience is like. Let's try it.

"When you are learning at your best, that's like..... What?"

As soon as we insert a "like" into a question or an answer we are creating a simile, a metaphor. You might recognise this, here are a few examples; he had hands like shovels, it hit me like a freight train, she had a voice like an angel. Inserting that permission to create a metaphor frees up our client to use whatever language or gestures they need to create a representation of their experience.

Once the client is working with a metaphor we can ask non-sensory specific questions to help them sequence, move forwards, backwards, shrink, expand or enrich their experience.

Here are some simple examples:

Finding out more about the metaphor.

Is there anything else about...? *This helps build a richer model for the client*

What kind of...?

Is there a size or shape to...?

Finding out a positive function of the metaphor

How does that serve you? *This helps create a creative, positive function to a limiting belief*

What is ...'s purpose?

Does ... have a quality?

Checking the sequence of the experience

Sequenced back

What happens just before? *This helps us understand a process or pattern*

Where does that come from?

Sequencing forward

What happens next?	<i>This helps us understand the complete process or pattern</i>
Then what happens?	

Where clean language really starts to come into its own is when the client's responses to those questions are non verbal. Have you ever suggested an idea to a friend or family member and rather than give you an answer they just roll their eyes? What does that eye roll mean? I bet you have some ideas. What non-verbal communication are we missing in our client's silences? What information do we push straight past when we press our clients to answer a therapeutic question? Imagine working with a teenager, you ask the question;

"These emotions you're experiencing, tell me, what are they like?"

They look at you, and shrug. Now this could be seen as an avoidance strategy, another sullen teenager not wanting to make a connection. But what if that shrug tells us more about that experience than you know, than they know.

"OK," you reply "where does... [you mimic the shrug that the client just displayed as closely as you can] come from?"

Take a moment to think about the impact of that question. For me the first thing it tells the client is this; I am listening to you and I have heard you. You might not have the words to describe the feeling, this might not even have been the original feeling, but this shrug, this represents far more to the client than they may be consciously aware of. Now they are invited to go inside and to start working with where that shrug, apathy, impasse, resistance originates. They may not be able to verbalise it but they may just be able to give it another physical representation. You can make progress with the next physical shape they use to represent their experience by asking another clean question, repeating the process again and again until the client has a much better understanding of where they are, and how they got there.

The client may not say anything that entire session but we can see that they have been supported and allowed to explore their "stuff" in a way which is respectful and sensitive and usually profound. We have joined the client, we have met that client "where they are" and helped them explore and facilitated their

transformation process. We haven't asked them to learn our type of therapy, we haven't "pushed" them through some change process, we haven't asked them about their darkest past. They have been given the opportunity to explore a little more of how they work 'right here, right now' to explore and expand the way they create their internal world. And all we did was ask some simple questions to allow them to do that work. How empowering for the client is that? How humanist? Trusting that given the right resources the client can heal themselves.

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