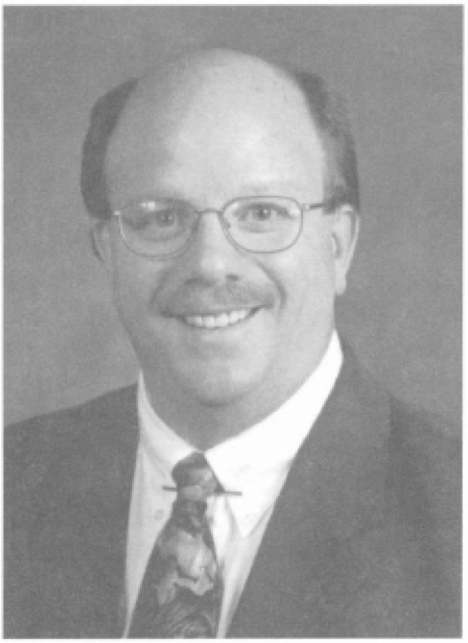

# CLARK'S CORNER

## *Examining Client Perceptions Techniques to Achieve Positive Change*

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***Mason (MI)* • *This article lists four helpful techniques for examining (and changing) client perceptions. These techniques can amplify helpful resources that may illuminate pathways for positive change(s).***

### PERCENTAGE QUESTIONS.

"Mom, how much of your son's mood is that he has 'turned against you" or 'hates you' and how much of this frustrating behavior could just be normal teenage ups and downs? 70/30? 50/50?" "Bill, how much of this problem with your supervising staff is one that's never going to change' or could it be that things just aren't going very well for you right now and may get better in the near future? 80/20?, 60/40? etc. I love this technique offered by Matt Selekman (1993) because you can introduce an idea or a different view of the problem very easily with just one question. One must be careful not to condone problem behavior, such as reframing drug use as "just experimenting."

Helping teens to think differently about a problem is a great accomplishment. People should never to underestimate how helpful it can be to change someone's "thinking" or how he or she perceives a problem as it can be fertile ground for solutions. One frustration often encountered is that people can get stuck in how they conceive a problem. Their conception of the problem is often very negative and singular, allowing no other explanations. The problem intensifies as they become stuck in a limited view. The percentage questions can offer the staff member a chance to introduce other competing realities or explanations that are more optimistic and promote change by loosening the problems "stranglehold" on the client.

### EXCEPTION QUESTIONS.

"Have there been times recently when the problem did not occur?" "When was the most recent time when you were able to __________ (perform the desired behavior)?" "What's different about those times?" "When did this happen?" "Who was involved?" "How did this happen?" This question used by Berg and Miller (1992) is a significant strategy used in the solution-focused therapy model, which originate in the family therapy field. It has great utility with offenders and their families. A strength-based approach holds to the adage "nothing always happens" to convey that there are always times when the problem does not happen or is not considered a problem by the family. Clients and their families typically view the complaints that they bring into court as constant and therefore usually to not notice any exceptions.

My years of experience with this model has shown that there are times when the truant attends school, the angry/assaultive person walks away from a fight, the follower has said "No" to the group, the parent or spouse did not berate or harp on the negative, or the substance abusing individual avoided use and stayed "clean." The idea is simple: Look for what your client does when the problem is NOT occurring and get them to repeat those same strategies in the future. Here, the profound difference between strength-based work and problem-focused models is obvious. In problem-focused approach we ask, "When does the problem happen?" "When does it get worse?"

In strength-based practice, there is greater utility in amplifying what is occurring during times when the problem does not happen than when it does, or when it the problem seems to lessen or pause. It is very important to note that exceptions need to be purposeful. To find out that during a certain period of time, a substance-abusing client abstained from using drugs only because the local "dealer" was out of town—is certainly an exception that is of no use!

### SCALING QUESTIONS

"On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the day after the miracle and 1 is when you were arrested (petitioned, charged, problem was at it's worst), where are you today?" "Numbers help me understand better. On a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is your problem solved and 1 is when it was at the worse, where are you now?"

How do field staff know that their client is getting better or moving in more productive ways? Scaling questions can gather subjective appraisals quickly and easily. These types of questions are favored by the managed care industry because they are vital to helping staff know what progress clients have already made and what further work needs to be addressed. Scaling questions help establish a baseline against which future progress may be measured. They are used at the end of the initial session and all subsequent meetings. These questions also helps field workers to know when someone is satisfied without the workers having to define vague terms such as "communicating better" or "feeling better."

Once a baseline is established, follow-up questions can be used to identify what first steps of small efforts the client and family believe are important to initiate. The brilliance and practicality of this model is evident in this line of follow-up questions: "You said a moment ago you were at 3, what would have to happen for you to move to a 4, just up one step?" "Gee, that answer sounded more like a description of when you'd be a 10 and the problem was solved. Think again to what *just a 4 would be like*." "What will you be doing when you are at a 4?" "What will your friends say you are doing different when you are at a 4?" "What would be the smallest (first) sign if you were moving to a 4?"

## PAST LIKES AND DISLIKES.

We are never the first staff members in authority positions to work with the offender that stands before us. They have had many staff in authority positions similar to us before we ever arrived on the scene. It is useful to find out from them what these past professionals did that the client liked or did not like. A great amount of information is available to us by just asking.

In my past work, I never inquired about past likes and dislikes, and now when I ask this question it helps me to know what not to do and (just as important) what will be more successful with this person, without having to stumble-bumble my way towards it.

*"Clark's Corner" will be a regular feature that offers direct practice suggestions, strategies and approaches for working with challenging clients and their families.*

*Michael is a consultant and trainer in Strength-Based Approaches and Motivational Interviewing and offers tools and tips as an ongoing column. Join us for the next installment of direct practice tips! Michael can be reached at assetbuilding@aol.com.*