

Key principles of effective challenging

- 1) It helps to believe in the **value of** challenge: it plays a vital role in moving a client towards new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. And, while we might find challenging hard to do, authentic, honest straight, well-meaning comments may actually be less damaging than empathic confluence or 'pussyfooting' around.
- 2) Challenging should be done **relationally**. In the early stages of therapy, simply attuning to the client in a non-judgmental way may be all the challenge that is needed. Later, once the relationship is in place, and trust has been established, more muscular/provocative challenges might be appropriate.
- 3) Challenges issued need to be in the **clients' interest** and not simply be a self-serving product of our own frustration, impatience or irritation. Sometimes this is easier said than done, particularly if we're caught up in powerful counter-transferences and projective identifications. So we need to be reflexive about our *urge* to challenge towards finding more constructive modes which can be received in non-defensive ways.
- 4) **Empathy** and compassion need to be to the fore when challenging such that our clients will hopefully be able to understand that our challenges arise out of caring concern. In other words, the challenge occurs in the wider context of the therapy. When giving such challenges, it can be useful to use the 'on the other hand...' type of intervention. For example, "I can feel something of how hard it is for you to talk about that. On the other hand, I think it would be helpful to put it into words." Or, "I'm hearing you say you're calm. On the other hand, I see your foot tapping and I'm wondering if your body is saying something different(?)".
- 5) Aim for a proportionate, **optimal** level of challenge. Too much challenge when the person isn't ready to receive it, can be shaming, overwhelming and destructive, and is likely to just cement defensive resistance. Insufficient challenge means we end up in confluence, colluding with cosy stagnation.
- 6) Asking **permission** to challenge or to give feedback can pave the way. "I'd like to offer you a challenge. Are you up for it?" Then the client is enlisted as an 'ally' and the challenge is dialogical rather than a one-way exercise of power.
- 7) It can help to encourage **self-challenge** towards enabling the client to be more self-aware and take responsibility for choices. For example: "As you're sharing these different stories of dating with me, I'm seeing a bit of pattern where it seems you tend to end up feeling used and betrayed. Is this a familiar pattern? Would you be willing to think about your own role in this?"
- 8) Often it is more productive to challenge unused **strengths** rather than weaknesses. To give an example, it might be more constructive to acknowledge the client's capacity to care for others if not themselves, rather than calling them an unhealthy 'rescuer'.
- 9) Challenge may often best issued with shared **gentle humour** – of course, this needs to evolve mutually (laughing with, not at) and be sensitively done.
- 10) We, too, need to stay **open to being challenged** (e.g. by clients or by our supervisor) if we are to grow and develop as therapists. At the very least it can provide a useful way of modelling the behaviour for clients.