

Tip #20 Unpacking Meaning

Begin every day expecting to be surprised and you will be.

I am often asked for training on listening skills. We all know how important listening is, but **how is effective listening actually done?** This tip provides more about the process of unpacking meaning that was mentioned in Tip #7, Assessing Readiness for Change.

You may have noticed that many people talk as if they are completely understood and everyone can read their minds. They don't fully explain what they are saying and **expect listeners to fill in the blanks**. Sometimes listeners mind-read accurately and sometimes they do not.

If you are going to help your clients, an essential step is to **do the work to understand their meanings**. This works best when you hold the assumption that you don't understand what your client just said. By making this assumption, you can uncover some fascinating and important things.

Clues indicating you might need to unpack more meaning:

- Your client is stuck in the behavior change process.
- You sense the client's resistance to change.
- You realize that you've been doing all the talking for a while.
- You hear something that sounds important to you.
- The client is arguing with you.
- You are puzzled and realize you may be proceeding with a mistaken understanding of what the client wants.
- You hear a generic word or phrase that could have several meanings, such as "I want to feel better" or "That doesn't work." (Do you know exactly what "that" refers to?)

What unpacking will do for you and your client:

- The client will feel heard and cared about.
- It quickly takes you out of the oppositional role and puts you solidly on the same side as your client. This is the first step in working with resistance.
- You avoid wasting time on goals that don't matter to the client.

Getting yourself ready:

To truly unpack your client's meaning, you must **make a shift**. For example, when you are in an "educating mode," most of the energy in the session is flowing from you to the client. This does not lend itself to being open to the client's

input. You have an agenda and goals in mind. This stance has its place, but the stance that works for exploring meaning is quite the opposite.

The **ideal position is very open**, holding no agenda. You might want to find a word, an image, or a physical posture that symbolizes this open state for you. I find the word “curiosity” works for me. I also find that my eyes blink a lot and then are widely open as I settle into this mode. Knowing how this feels to you can assist you in making the shift into an open mode.

This isn’t to say that an educating mode (or any other for that matter) is wrong. The **skilled counselor can shift** stances easily during a session, adopting the most useful one for the particular moment.

Wording to transition into an unpacking mode:

- “I’m wondering. Would it be helpful to explore what this is all about for you?”
- “This sounds important. Would it be OK if we take a moment to understand this better so I can best help you?”
- “When I say ... I tend to mean ... Is that what you mean or is it different for you?”
- “What matters to you about ...?”
- “What does ... mean to you?”

(The blank spaces are where you put in words you’ve just heard that seem key.)

Questions that help continue the unpacking process:

- “And if you had ... what would that do for you?”
- “What are the best and worst parts?”
- “Would it help to talk more about that part?”
- “What matters most about it?”
- “Are there parts of this that mean more to you than others?”
- “Is this what matters the most to you or is there something else we’re missing?”