

Tip # 72 Summarizing

*Life is not holding a good hand;
Life is playing a poor hand well.*
Danish proverb

*The question is not what a man can scorn,
or disparage, or find fault with,
but what he can love, and value, and appreciate.*
John Ruskin

Summarizing is a powerful form of mirroring that furthers the change process. It includes affirming (Tip # 63) the client's strengths and directing attention in the session to the client's reasons to change. You hear the client's change talk (Tip # 69) and reflect it back. You can't assume that the client has put together his change talk into an action plan for himself. You guide him to do this when you summarize what you hear.

There is a metaphor used by Motivational Interviewing trainers. Your client's **words are like a meadow**. Much of what grows in this meadow is weeds and grass. However, scattered in there are lovely wildflowers. These flowers are the client's change thoughts. As you wander with the client during your session through the meadow of his thoughts, beliefs and actions you are collecting the ones that point toward positive change. When you summarize the change talk you are presenting to the client a bouquet that you collected as you walked with him through the meadow.

Here is an example of some **change talk imbedded in a client's words**. Notice that overall the talk sounds negative because the flowers are overpowered by weeds.

I can't lose weight. It's just too hard. I've tried before, and it just comes back on. **I know I should for my diabetes**, but I really love food and it seems like when I diet I'm always hungry. (Need)

I go out with my friends on Fridays, and we try out new restaurants. Boy, on those nights we have fun. No way am I going to diet at those meals. Oh, a few months ago **I did stop having those sweet drinks** before dinner that they all like, because I realized I really don't like them anyway. But no way will I stop going out with them and having fun. (Taking action)

I'm going on a European tour next summer and I'm sort of dreading it, because I get so tired when we walk a lot. I wish I could walk longer. **I want to see all the sights**. (Reason)

It's such a drag to count everything I eat. I can't remember to do it all the time. I mean, I guess **it's easy enough during the week** when I have a routine, but the weekends are so chaotic. (Ability)

You've got to be kidding. I'm not going to cart that food record book around all the time. **I'll start counting the carbs at lunch during the week**, but don't make me do it when I go out with my friends. (Commitment)

The doctor gives me such a hard time when my blood work is high, but I just can't seem to get it down. She is really nice, by the way. I like this new one. **I do want to make her happy**, but it's just so hard to remember to watch my portions. (Desire)

A summary of this discussion might sound like this:

I hear that you are frustrated that you haven't lost much weight yet. You know it would improve your diabetes and you would really like to make this nice new doctor happy with normal blood sugars. You have another reason too. On this upcoming trip you want to be more mobile and get the most out of it. You've made some important changes already such as leaving off the sweet drinks on Friday nights. You've put some thought into this idea of keeping track of your carbs and have decided to do that this week at lunch on work days. Did I get it all?

Notice that **a little bit of sustain talk** is included in the summary to support empathy. Most of the summary is affirmation and mirroring change talk.

It takes practice to attend to change talk and then summarize it back to the client. Of course, your first efforts will be awkward. One type of practice is to collect the change talk in your notes after the session has ended. You could then craft your summary. You could begin the next session with that summary. Even if you do not have a chance to share your summary with the client the first few times, you will be gaining valuable practice.