

Tip #55
(Working with Ambivalence to Change)

*It is the mark of an educated mind
to be able to entertain a thought
without accepting it.*
Aristotle

*Conditions for creativity are to be puzzled;
to concentrate; to accept conflict and tension;
to be born everyday; to feel a sense of self.*
Erich Fromm

Ambivalence is an inherent part of the change process. Acknowledging and working with these internal conflicts make change more likely.

Examples of ambivalence:

- I want to be in good shape and I hate to exercise.
- I want to lose weight and I don't want to stop eating for comfort.
- I want to recover from this eating disorder and I don't want to gain weight.

Often a client has **not made a connection yet** between the conflicting beliefs, desires and behaviors. It is as if the part of the person that wants the positive outcome is not in communication with the part that is not willing to do the new behavior.

It may be tempting when you hear ambivalence in your client to jump in and support the part that wants to change. It is **not your job to hand the client a solution** to the internal conflict. As a matter of fact, if you do, you will likely encounter resistance. The resistant side will become stronger. How to avoid this? Slow down when you notice these internal conflicts and bring them up with the client. You can work with the discrepancies you hear between goals and behavior, and you and your client can look together for areas of flexibility.

The most respectful and effective way to begin is to **mirror what you hear**, possibly with a tone of curiosity. "Oh, so you really want to have better blood sugar control. You also love good food and that it ruins the experience of a meal when you measure your portions. Is that the way it is, or did I miss something?"

You are most likely to get cooperation in this exploration if you ask permission. For example, once a discrepancy comes up, you could say, "This sounds important and maybe even a reason you feel so stuck. Would you be willing to take a look at this together?"

Holding ambivalence is not easy and takes **shifting to a different perspective**. If you observe closely, you may notice the client staring off into space or blinking, all signs that a shift may be happening. Allow time for this rather than jumping in with your suggestions.

Working with conflicting intentions once they come up and you have agreement to work on them:

Unpack some of what is behind the initial conflicting statements. For instance, in the example above, you may discover that the client knows she will have more energy and very likely live longer and maybe see that wonderful grandson of hers graduate from high school if her blood sugars are better controlled. You could also ask some open-ended questions about her enjoyment of food. During this open, nonjudgmental exploration, most clients will discover some flexibility they had not seen yet or will generate some solutions on their own. This is because when someone is locked into a conflict (whether internal or external), curiosity and creativity are absent. Your invitation to explore without judgment allows untangling of the knots and vision to see a way out. The fun part for you is that you need only focus on the process of exploration. The client does most of the work of coming up with solutions. You may offer a few here and there, but it's amazing how often this is not necessary. The best solutions come from the client because she knows her life and circumstance much better than you do.

Expect that **some clients will not accept their ambivalence** or not even be able to see it, though it is obvious to you. They are not ready for that leap. They are in the early stages of the change process. Offer to revisit it at a later time.

Finally, a word about you:

It may be uncomfortable to be in the presence of a client holding conflicting intentions. Ask yourself *what* about it makes it so uncomfortable. Is it pressure to "fix it," to make the client change? If so, remind yourself that your job does not include making people change, only facilitating change when clients are ready.

Excerpted from **Counseling Tips for Nutrition Therapists**

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