



## Common traps that promote disengagement

The basic structure of a working relationship may be communicated quite quickly, often within the first few minutes of a session. During this time the client will often be weighing up whether or not they should even stick around and see the session through. Questions such as the following will often play a big role in the decision they make.

- How much am I supposed to talk?
- Is it safe to divulge personal information and be vulnerable?
- How much will the key worker direct me, guide me or follow me?

Perhaps the largest barrier to actively engaging is the communication of non-mutuality. The subtle and often not so subtle professional messages that imply “I’m the expert here and I’ll dictate where this session goes, what you should do and how you should think/act” promote client passivity, disengagement and resistance when it is exactly the opposite that is needed if change is to occur.

It is easier than we might think to start off on the wrong foot and the wrong direction entirely by falling into certain traps early in a session or perhaps even prior to it beginning. All of this of course happens with the best of intentions, but results in the exact opposite of what the key worker would like to achieve.

Below are eight such traps that key workers must consciously avoid if they are to truly help clients to make long lasting positive changes in their lives.

### The Expert Trap

In the Expert Trap, key workers fall into providing direction to the client without first helping the client to determine his or her own goals, direction and plans. The problem with this approach is that clients may tend to passively accept the key workers suggestions, and may only half-heartedly commit to the difficult work involved in changing. A key worker using the motivational approach is not non-directive, that is, he or she will guide the client toward discussing certain material over others and occasionally will offer suggestions for change. However, this is done only after ascertaining the client’s interest in hearing the key worker’s advice, or when the key worker perceives that the client is in immediate danger if not given advice.

### The Premature Focus Trap

Although the motivational approach does not suggest that key workers simply follow the clients' lead as in Rogerian or Person-Centred therapy, motivational theory cautions key workers against focusing too quickly on a specific problem or aspect of a problem. Difficulties with premature focus include raising client resistance and focusing on an unimportant or secondary problem.

## **The Labelling Trap**

The Labelling Trap happens when a key worker attempts to convince a client that he or she is an alcoholic, addict, or some other label. Labels often carry a certain stigma in the public mind; therefore it is not surprising that people with reasonable self-esteem resist them. Labels also point out that “the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) philosophy specifically recommends against such labelling of others” (p. 68). Despite this, some key workers believe that clients must accept a label or diagnosis in order to change their behaviour. Motivational theory disagrees with this view, and suggests that key workers de-emphasize labels whenever possible.

## **The Blaming Trap**

It is possible that clients attempt to blame others for their problems. Key workers may feel compelled to show the client how he or she is at fault for the difficulties encountered. In the motivational approach, neither of these approaches are seen as useful. Blame is irrelevant. Establishing a no-fault policy when counselling a person is suggested, such as commenting, “I’m not interested in looking for who is responsible, but rather what’s troubling you, and what you might be able to do about it”.

## **The Chat Trap**

It is possible to fall into the trap of simply chatting and having insufficient direction to the conversation and/or session. Making small talk may seem like a friendly opener, and there is no doubt it can and often does have an ice-breaking effect. This is especially true of some cultures where a certain amount of chatting is both polite and expected before getting down the more serious matters at hand. Although this type of chat is comfortable for many it is unlikely to be very helpful when used in more than small doses. In one treatment study, higher levels of in session informal chat predicted lower levels of client motivation for change and retention (Bamatter et al., 2010). In the engaging process, primary attention is devoted to the client’s concerns and goals. These in turn lead into the focussing process.

## **The Assessment Trap**

The first session or sessions are often not representative of what is to follow, although it is more than likely that clients will be unaware of this. When clients view intake or assessment as indicative to the treatment experience rather than the first step or beginning they are likely to become alienated from the start. Many if not most agencies and organisations predictably fall into the Assessment Trap, as though it were necessary to know a lot of information before being able to help. The format of an assessment-intensive session is also very predictable in that the key worker asks a whole bunch of questions and the client answers them. This quickly places the client in a passive and one-down role (Rogers, 1942). What makes this trap worse is that the client will usually struggle to see the purpose or use of such questioning as they are already intimately knowledgeable about the information being discussed.

## Question/Answer Trap

In this trap the key worker and client fall into a pattern of question-answer, question-answer, and so on. The problem with this pattern is that it tends to elicit passivity and closes off access to deeper levels of experience. Thus, clients are not encouraged to explore issues in depth, and the client-key worker relationship becomes increasingly hierarchical.

## Confrontation/Denial Trap

Most key workers have had the experience of interviewing a client who is not yet ready to change, and who provides a reasonable argument in response to every statement the key worker makes. The key worker and client then engage in an argumentative, Confrontation/Denial Trap, in which the client counters each argument for change with an argument for remaining the same. One of the benefits to the key worker of adapting a motivational approach is the avoidance of discouraging interchanges. Rather than engaging in futile attempts to convince the client to change, this approach encourages the client to voice the reasons for change, with just a little questioning and guidance supplied by the key worker. Remember that if a person feels backed into a corner, or one point of view, the person will usually defend that point of view more strongly. If you leave your client with no other option than to argue with you, that is what you will get. Motivational approaches may help the client and the key worker avoid the inevitable frustration of two people working at odds.

## Further reading

Miller, W.R. and Rollnick, S. (2013), *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*, Guildford press: New York.

Viets, V.L, Walker, D.D, & Miller, W.R. "What is motivation to change: A scientific analysis" in McMurrin, M (2002) *Motivating clients to change: A guide to enhancing engagement in therapy*, Wiley Series in Forensic Clinical Psychology.

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