

'USING STONES' EXERCISE TO DESCRIBE A SOCIAL NETWORK OR ENCOURAGE A CLIENT TO DISCLOSE

Background

Using stones - Many counsellors and therapists have a collection of stones that they use with clients. One exercise might be to ask the client to lay out the stones to represent how they see their life at the moment. First they can pick a stone to represent them. Then they can choose other stones to stand for the people in their life and lay them out as a pattern to represent their current situation. It can be revealing for a client to see the pattern of stones. You might like to invite the client to rearrange the stones into a pattern they would prefer.

Aim of Exercise

The aim is for the client to explore his or her own social network or support systems and discuss relational aspects of their life. A collection (probably around twenty in order to offer choice) of stones, or buttons, with as wide a range of sizes, colours and textures as possible is required.

Method

The stones should be laid out in front of the client, on a table or on the floor, preferably in a tray to keep the collection together.

1. Using the stones to represent individual people, the client is asked to describe/portray how they see their network, placing family/relatives, friends and colleagues in relation to themselves. Usually, with them at the centre of the network/web. **THE CLIENT SHOULD BE THE ONLY ONE TO HANDLE THE STONES.**
2. When selecting each stone, the client chooses one that, as closely as possible, reminds them of, or represents, each person they have in mind.
3. The distance from the stone that represents the client indicates how close they feel that person is to them
4. When commenting by using counselling skills the 'facilitator' can note the size, texture and colour of the stones used and the distance of each from the client. All of this can give insights into how the client sees themselves and their support network.
5. Someone who is deceased can be incorporated within the picture as they can still be influencing the pattern or relationships
6. The usual counselling skills are used with the facilitators giving feedback on the choices of the client (For example, "I notice that the stone you chose for yourself is smaller than your partner's", or, "I see your 'son' is further away from you than your 'daughter'" or "What do you make of that formation?" or "In a perfect world, how different would that arrangement be?").
7. The exercise can be very effective with clients who may not be very articulate or find it hard to talk and those who find difficulty in expressing feelings. It can also be very useful for highly articulate clients who may use words to 'defend' themselves or hide uncomfortable facts from themselves or others.
8. The technique is dynamic and can be used to indicate changes over time. For example, the client can be asked to set out the stones as they see the situation five, ten, fifteen years ago. It can also be used as a form of goal setting. For example, if they are unhappy with their present position (feeling lonely or isolated), they can set out the situation (i.e. in a stone formation) as they would prefer it to be.

9. A drawback of this exercise can be that there is no permanent record for the client and counsellor, compared to carrying out a similar exercise on paper. Ways around this include a photograph or video of the arrangement of the stones or a drawing of the arrangement. Many clients now photograph the stones via their mobile phones.
10. At the end of the exercise, the client is asked to put the stones back into the tray or bag. **The facilitator should not do this.**
11. The whole exercise is carried out under the **control of the client**, and the facilitator should not interrupt, challenge or be in any way judgemental.
12. Give person an opportunity to take a picture at the end of the exercise, if they so wish, as a permanent reminder of the work you have done together

Advantages

- Can feel less threatening than speaking directly to a helper
- Client is actually engaging, not just speaking, speech is far more black and white; stones are more ambiguous and can be interpreted in a number of ways, new perspectives can emerge
- When we talk, we monitor what we are saying as we are aware of the impact upon the listener. This exercise is away around this as the stones allow the client to 'lose themselves'
- Cuts across cognitive processes and connects with feelings
- Captures whole experiencing not just different bits at a time
- Represents a graphic snapshot of life as it is at that immediate point in time

Disadvantages

- If not presented properly, can be seen as though the person seeking help is being tested in some way, so important to alleviate any such fears by explaining the exercise properly and making sure that it is seen as relevant to the person's issues i.e. must be, and be seen to be, relevant and relate to client issues
- Needs sufficient time and appropriate material to be available
- Can emphasise a client's loneliness and lack of support

Cautions

- It is important to have had experience of this as both a client and a helper before working with 'real' people in this way
- Should not be used until the therapeutic relationship and working alliance are in place, definitely not first or second session
- In this exercise, the stones should only be handled by the person seeking help, as the holding of the stones as well as the selecting and placing of them is important. If you do need to touch the stones ask for permission to do so first, thus indicating client ownership
- Finish well before the end of a the session to allow time for the person to sit with and/or explore any feelings which may arise and be in a safe place to leave