

Eliminating Negative Expectations and Creating Positive Ones

If you ever find yourself leading a group session and a client is having a difficult time overcoming negative expectations, you might want to try an intervention that has proved to be very effective in that type of situation.

During the past few years I've developed several very effective interventions that are based on the basic principle that there is no meaning in the world. Things happen, which have no inherent meaning, and then we attribute meaning to the events. Beliefs are nothing more than the meaning we attribute to an event. They are statements about reality that we think are *the* truth, in other words, facts.

Beliefs formed early in life, such as *I'm not good enough*, *Relationships don't work*, and *I'll never get what I want in life* have a significant impact on our behavior and feelings.

One of the interventions, the Decision Maker[®] Process, assists clients to realize that the belief is nothing more than one meaning they *attributed* to the events that led to the belief, a meaning that has existed only in their minds and was not *discovered* in the world. At that point, the belief literally disappears. ("Everyone Knows You Can't Eliminate Fundamental Beliefs Quickly and Permanently. ... Are You Sure?" *California Therapist*, Sept.-Oct., 2001)

The DM Process has proven to be very successful in assisting over 1,000 clients in one-on-one sessions to eliminate a number of beliefs, leading to lasting change in a wide variety of dysfunctional behavior and emotional patterns. It is difficult to use the DM Process effectively in a group situation, however, because each client requires personalized assistance and it can take up to half an hour to permanently eliminate a belief.

On the other hand, several of the other interventions, which are based on the same basic principle that underlies the DM Process, can be used in a group setting. One that is particularly useful is the Decision Maker[®] Expectation Process (DMEP). Very often a client's behavior or emotional state is the direct result of his/her expectations. The DMEP is very effective in changing negative expectations to positive ones.

For example, Lois, one of my clients, expected life to be difficult and to not get what she wanted. That expectation, along with several beliefs, led her to resist setting goals and to give up as soon as she experienced any difficulty. She just drifted through life, without any real purpose. In addition to affecting her behavior, Lois' expectation also was partly responsible for her anxiety and mild depression.

Here's how I used the DMEP with Lois.

We started with the presenting problem: a difficulty in setting goals and sticking to them, and a pervasive sense of anxiety and despair. The beliefs that contributed to the existence of this pattern were identified and eliminated with the DM Process before I used the DMEP with Lois.

I started by asking Lois, "What do you expect from life? What do you expect that you will be able to achieve?"

She replied, as I indicated above, "I expect life to be difficult and I won't get what I want."
ML: "What happened early in your life that might have led you to this expectation."

Lois: "My parents said no to almost anything I asked them. What I wanted to wear, spending time with friends, sleep-overs, where I wanted to go, what I wanted to buy. Everything. With my parents it was

always a struggle. I'd have to fight for everything I got. They'd always say to me: 'Life is hard. What makes you think you can have whatever you want?'"

ML: "Can you see that your expectation made sense given the hundreds of experiences you had that were similar to what you just described. Can you see that almost anyone would have formed a similar expectation—given those exact circumstances? Can you see that your expectations are a function of those specific events?"

Lois: "Yes, I can see that."

ML: "If the events of your childhood had been very different, if, for example, your parents had allowed you to do most of the things you wanted that weren't dangerous, had allowed you to participate in decisions that affected you, had supported you in getting what you wanted, and had told you that when you grew up you could have almost anything you wanted in life if you really were committed, would you have formed the same expectation?"

Lois: "Of course not. If I had had those parents, I'd have expected something totally different."

ML: "Notice that your current expectations of life, which feel to you as if they are *real*, as if they are being caused by life itself, would be totally different if you had had a different childhood?"

Lois: "That's true. I had never looked at it that way before."

ML: "Well, let's take a look at the differences between your circumstances as a child and today. [I usually ask clients to identify the differences on their own. When they can't, I ask questions that point them out, as indicated below.] As a child you were totally dependent on your parents to get what you wanted. Is that true today?"

Lois: "No, I live by myself and rarely see my parents."

ML: "Did you have any skills to earn money on your own as a child?"

Lois: "No, I didn't."

ML: "Do you have the ability to earn the money you need to buy the things you want today?"

Lois: "Yes, I earn a fairly good living."

ML: "What about your freedom to do what you want? Can you see that as a child you were dependent on your parents' permission to get what you want and today you aren't dependent on anyone else?"

Lois: "Yes, that's true."

ML: "So, Lois, is it real to you that today your circumstances are very different in a number of respects from your childhood?"

Lois: "I can see that."

ML: "Here's my last question. Don't tell me what you want, what you wish for, or how you'd like it to be. Just tell me what any reasonable person would *expect* given your circumstances today. You live on your own. You aren't dependent on your parents. You are much better at dealing with people than you

were as a child. You earn a good living. There is no one to tell you what you have to do or can't do. If you can't get what you want from one person, you can go to another. Given those circumstances, what would you expect about getting what you want in life?"

Lois: "Given those circumstances I'd be able to get what I wanted if I really tried."

ML: "Look inside. What do you feel, not think? What do you expect, right now?"

Lois: "That I can have what I want."

In this five minute dialogue, Lois realized that the meaning she had given her childhood experiences with her parents was not *the* truth about what she could expect from life, but *a* truth based on the specific environment in which she lived. That freed her to look at today's circumstances and form new expectations based on them. In my experience the shift in expectations is permanent.

In other words, we (unconsciously) assume that the meaning we attribute to our childhood experiences should be attributed to life in general, at all times, under all conditions. When we realize that the meaning is not wrong, but was appropriate *only* for the specific situations that led to it—and that if there had been different events in our lives we would have formed a different meaning (expectation), the expectation literally disappears. Then we can create a new, positive expectation based on today's circumstances.

The Decision Maker® Expectation Process is effective in a group setting because, even though it is done with one client at a time, it only takes a few minutes to produce a significant change in the client's life. Moreover, just by observing one group member go through the DMEP, the other clients in the group realize that their own negative expectations can be eliminated and replaced with positive ones.

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Morty Lefkoe, founder of the Decision Maker® Institute (DMI) in Westport, CT, is the author of *Re-create Your Life: Transforming Yourself and Your World*. More information about the DM Process and the other interventions based on the same principles can be found at www.decisionmaker.com. DMI offers courses in California that teach the Decision Maker® Process and its variations. The courses meet the qualifications for 15 hours of CEU for M.F.C.C.s. and L.C.S.W.s as required by the California Board of Behavioral Sciences. PCE# 1424