Black and White Thinking

Black and white thinking is common, and is particularly present in adolescents whose cognitive development has not yet reached an adult stage. This way of thinking, perceiving and expressing thoughts involves using extreme language, and is often negative and blaming towards self or other.

Black & white thinking may lead to unhelpful perceptions about people, such as family members, which can build distance and resentment rather than understanding and compromise.

An example to illustrate this is a young person who says their mum is “always on my back”. Reframing in this situation may involve:

- **Asking:** “What does she do that makes it seem like she is “always on your back”?”
- **Clarifying:** “So she tells you a lot, to tell her where you are going? How often do you think she would say that to you in one day or one week?”
- **Reframing:** “Once a day? So it’s not all the time? Sounds like she cares about you and your safety. What would help you both to feel okay about this?”

This reframe enables a young person to perceive a different and more positive reality about why their mother is behaving in the way she is, and challenges the extreme language used by the young person. It further encourages the young person to respect others needs in a shared household, to consider positive solutions and to assert their own wishes and needs within the household.

Strengths-Based and Narrative Therapeutic Approaches

These approaches offer effective techniques and questions for reframing. McCashen (1998) recommends the following practice principles in order to implement a strengths-based approach in your work:

- Respect for peoples’ intrinsic worth, rights, capacities, uniqueness & commonalities
- Sharing of information, knowledge, resources, skills and decision making
- Collaboration: team work, partnership, consultation and inclusion
- Social Justice: equity, access, equality, participation, self determination
- Transparency: having things out in the open, open information and communication

Strengths-based questions seek to draw out an alternative perception or explanation of behaviour or an
event, which helps the young person to identify and believe in their own or other family members’ successes, skills, strengths and abilities.

Using this approach involves exploring what has worked in the past, rather than what has not worked. While both negative and positive perceptions are valid, the latter provides a more fertile soil for change, by helping the young person feel capable, empowered and motivated towards change. In contrast the deficit-based, problem-focussed approaches of traditional therapies present situations as requiring work and effort to address the problem and move on.

Narrative questioning provides the opportunity to rewrite the young person’s story or narrative about events or experiences in a more positive light. It recognises and respects that young people and families may have endured many hardships. This approach avoids pathologising, ie. use of medical and psychological terms which indicate dysfunction, deficit or failure.

Instead, it assists young people to view themselves and their family as skilled, capable and resourceful. One technique used in this approach involve ‘identifying exceptions to the rule’ - when problems weren’t present, or when things were better, so that these experiences can be emphasised and learnt from.

What if there’s nothing positive?

Some parents behave in ways that don’t lend themselves to reframing. An abused child, for example, needs to know that the behaviour is wrong, and that it was not their fault. In working with these young people it may help to emphasise their survival skills (rather than having a ‘victim’ focus) and to help them to identify the positive coping strategies that they used to deal with this difficult situation.

Other parents do not always behave in ways which help to build their young person’s self-esteem. In these cases it is important to validate experiences for the young person, and identify behaviours which have been unhelpful.

In situations where a young person’s safety is guaranteed, talking about parenting behaviour can be done in a realistic and non-blaming way that acknowledges some parents don’t get it right all the time.

It is also helpful for the young person to understand their parents’ behaviour in a broader context. For example, thinking about where they learnt that behaviour from, or what their experience was like as a child. This may help a young person realise it is not their fault, or that the behaviour was not a response to them personally.

When using these approaches, it is very important to not minimise the pain or unfairness of particular experiences, but to empathise and validate feelings, to offer new language which may be less extreme if appropriate, and to invite the young person to hold additional ideas and views about the experiences (reframe).

For example, reframing issues concerning family may enable a young person to identify their resilience, and see positive skills and knowledge that they have learned from what may be difficult family interactions and relationships. They may also see what family members may have been trying to do for them in the past that was interpreted by them in a negative light.

For example, a young person may be angry with his father, who was drunk a lot and left the young person to cook for himself.

Empathise and validate:
“How did that make you feel, that your dad was focussed on drinking alcohol and not on meeting your needs as a hungry child?”
“I can understand that you would feel angry and sad about that.”
“How did you manage to know how to cook and to look after yourself?”
“Are there other times when you have managed to work things out for yourself?”

Reframe:
“Do you think your dad thought he was providing for you in other ways, such as working to pay the bills?”
“Do you think he knew that his drinking was stopping him from being the father you would have liked?”
“That’s disappointing that he did not look after all your needs as a child, but were there other ways in which he was an alright father?”
“Because your dad was not looking after all your needs, were there any things you learned or skills you developed as a result?”

Reframing with other family members

Reframing ideally takes place with other family members as well as with the young person. This maximises the effect of the reframes and enable changes to perceptions, stories and attitudes at the level of the family system, not just within an individual.

Idea from this Help Sheet

- Reframing involves presenting an alternative possible explanation, interpretation or perception of an experience.
- Use reflective listening to validate feelings and experiences and build rapport prior to using reframing techniques.
- Reframe in a way which respects their perceptions and values, while offering a new perspective and possible solutions.
Related Help Sheets

Worker Help Sheets
- Dealing with “Black and White Thinking”
- Discussing Family
- Improving Family Relations
- Family Dynamics

Parent Help Sheets
- Family Dynamics
- Dealing with Past Hurts and Traumas
- Building our Relationship
- Improving Communication

Suggested Reading