

Toolbox of Collaborative Techniques and Skills

PUTTING THE TENDING-MOVING CONTINUUM INTO ACTION: THE ESSENTIAL SPECIAL OPS COLLABORATIVE TOOLBOX

Now that you're familiar with our continuum of general techniques for navigating emotion in a fraught moment, you'll be asking "But what does that look like? What should I do or say?" Over time, each of us will develop our own personal style of working and will bring our own personality into our work. But there are many specific technical skills that every professional should master. Here's our list- it's not exhaustive, but it's a good start.

I. TECHNIQUES THAT ARE USEFUL AND EFFECTIVE WITH EVERY CLIENT

#1 Staying in role

Because clients come to us in a fragile and often emotionally needy state, they are never going to get quite as much *of* us or *from* us as they want. And actually, it's important that they don't. Our capacity to empathize with our clients in helpful ways that foster growth depends on our maintaining a crucial increment of professional distance (rather than over-identifying or merging with our clients). A state of empathic connectedness requires each person in the interaction to retain a separate "self." As helping professionals, we need a "transitional space," a neutral zone between us across which we can reach when we need to regulate our clients' anxiety up or down, introduce a new idea, or lend our clients some of our own confidence. Setting firm, predictable (but not punitive or inflexible) boundaries from which we depart only after thoughtful consideration, and maintaining our professional stance-- these techniques make it possible for us to invite clients out of fixed positions so they can achieve their own highest transformative potential.

The more traumatized or anxious a client, the more likely it is that he or she will push at our boundaries. Healthier clients (who have developed a measure of basic trust in the world and in their own capacities to tolerate painful feelings) may express frustration without professional limits, but are likely to respect (or at least accept) them. But think about the clients who pressure us to return their calls on Sunday, to depart from our ordinary billing protocols, or to engage in social relationships with them. Especially those of us who are vulnerable to over-functioning (or over-functioning with respect to certain character types) may find ourselves temporarily pulled out of our own professional orbit and tempted to make unusual or inappropriate concessions. If you've ever found yourself scheduling a meeting with a client outside of your own office hours without asking yourself why are making the accommodation and if the client really needs it, then you know what we mean. Maintaining sturdy Micro-and Macrocontainers requires that when we alter our ordinary way of working we do so only after thoughtful consideration and self-reflection. Holding to well-defined, predictable, reliable

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boundaries and resisting the urge to move to quickly to accommodate or gratify reinforces the crucial notion that you are a safe base who not only empathizes with your client but has faith in their capacity to tolerate anxiety long enough for both of you to understand and make meaning of it.

Maintaining our professional stance (our clients are not our friends!) also mitigates against professional burnout. Holding to your boundaries minimizes the risk that you will feel frustrated, exploited, or worn-out by your client. This is important. If you become resentful, you'll begin (without meaning to) to send signals that there are cracks in your empathy. In that way, your client will have succeeded in creating exactly what he or she feared and expected- another person who has let them down.

#2 Minimizing small talk

Remember that our clients are often suffering. And we are are, for this period in their lives, centrally important figures in the central drama of their lives. In fact, because they rely on us for so much, we tend to be idealized or devalued in ways and with intensities of which we are not aware. Bear in mind that our clients carry us in their minds when they are not with us, listen for our internalized voices when they feel unmoored, and often scan our faces with the anxious intensity of a cancer patient analyzing their oncologist for clues about the outcome of their latest CAT scan.

How we conduct ourselves and what we talk about in the presence of our clients matter. A lot. Follow your clients. Cues as to what they need from you are embedded in the nature of their moods (which will likely vary from meeting to meeting). If they feel like chatting about their vacation, let them. But don't walk into the room exchanging news about your grandchildren with your co-counsel or announce to the room that you had a fabulous vacation. Even when our clients joke, it's often a way of managing more painful feelings. Ours is a serious business, and should be treated as such.

Small talk that is not initiated by our clients is also disrespectful of their time, effort, and money.

#3 Not acting celebratory

When we work with colleagues of whom we are fond or in a process we feel passionately about, it is easy to put a happy spin on things. But statements like "I'm so glad you chose a Collaborative Divorce," or "Congratulations for choosing mediation" can often be upsetting or offensive to clients who, while putting on a brave face, feel their world is collapsing around them. Divorce is not a cause for celebration. Especially at the beginning (before you and your client know each other well), find a way to support your client's higher order choices without do any emotional high-fives.

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#4 Non-judgmental listening

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion described a state of being “without memory or desire”- in other words, meeting each new client fresh and taking in their story without imposing our own assumptions, biases or agendas. Especially if you’ve been practicing your profession for many years, it’s impossible not to recognize certain character types or project the trajectory of a given case. But that type of professional shorthand can get in our ways. We may be very technically talented, but until our clients feel deeply understood and accepted—not as we wish or imagine them to be, but as they are—nothing else we do will matter. Our job to accept the whole person- quite a different process from attempting to like everything about them or agreeing with their positions. Effective listening involves keeping steady eye contact, maintaining an open, caring expression that reacts appropriately but does not reflect surprise or exaggerated emotion (positive or negative), an emotional (or actual) “leaning in” posture, and restraint in allowing the client plenty of time to talk, reflect, and allow his or her narrative to unfold organically. At the same time, we do need to respond and to ask questions of our own- but how much or about what should fit the needs of the client and the moment.

#5 Asking curious questions*

Authentically curious questions are non-rhetorical and not rote. They carry no assumptions, biases, and judgment. They convey a genuine interest in the reply, even if the reply may contain painful truths. An authentically curious question is crafted and conveyed in a way that opens a safe, space for a new paradigm of communication. It is non-shaming and invites vulnerability- the path to new ideas and to intimacy. In order to be effective, a curious question needs to convey the sense that the speaker can be trusted, so one’s words, tone, and non-verbal behavior must contain a sensitivity to the receiver’s own style of communication and emotional state in the moment. And often, a curious question requires us to move invite our conversation partner’s aggression towards us, rather than deflecting, countering with aggression of our own, or fleeing into another topic.

Examples:

#1

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"I can hear in your voice that you're frustrated with me, but I'm not sure why. Can you help me understand?"

#2

"My bookkeeper let me know today that you are several months behind. I'm interested to know if there's anything on your end that might be making it difficult to stay up to date, or if you have any questions or concerns about my bill that we haven't discussed?"

*If you haven't yet read Sharon Ellison's book "Taking the War Out of Words: The Power of Non-Defensive Communication," we highly recommend it!

#6 Employing Empathy vs. Sympathy

You've probably noticed in your own life that the phrase, "That must have been so terrible for you," can sometimes make you feel worse and sometimes make you feel better. Assuming the speaker is someone whose good intention you are inclined to trust, what accounts for the difference?

Any words offered to you in a moment of powerful feeling that do not give you a sense that the person speaking has a true grasp of your emotional experience will fall flat. On the other hand, those same words, spoken from a place of deep understanding and emotional connection, can have the power to sustain you through your darkest moments.

Sympathetic words are not only generally unhelpful, they can be destructive. These words are spoken from a position of distance. They are often self-referential ("Sorry you're sick! I hope you don't have what I had last week! Gosh, it was the worst.") or are born out of an anxiety in the speaker that conveys that they are overwhelmed by your experience ("I'm sure you're biopsy will come back negative. I just have a feeling."). Some of the most problematic sympathetic responses involve the speaker moving too quickly to advice or action ("I'm so sorry you got laid off. I know a great vocational coach- I'll email you his contact info right away!") or dismissing the importance of a loss ("Sucks that she broke up with you! She didn't deserve you anyway!").

Empathic responses require restraint, self-management and the ability to tolerate painful feelings without trying to discharge them in any of the ways described above. Consider the way a good parent focuses on her baby's cry and movements without becoming too anxious, takes them inside herself, and lets them resonate within her until she develops an understanding of the problem and can offer the right solution. This can be tough; listening to a baby's cry is painful, and not rushing in too quickly to "solve" the problem requires emotional maturity and restraint. An empathic listener doesn't rush to fill silence with platitudes. He or she sits in silence until they have a sense that they should speak. If the moment is right, he or she asks as many curious questions as it

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takes for them to learn enough about the speaker's experience that they can feel it on a gut level. While one person can never fully know what it's like to be another person (and, as we described, is most helpful when they can maintain some emotional distance), the most powerfully therapeutic tool we have available to us, the one thing that everyone craves, is the experience of feeling profoundly understood. True expression of empathy is the emotional equivalent of saying "I can't know everything about what it's like to be you, and though I can't take your pain away I am right here with you. I understand what it's like to walk in your shoes. And if the most helpful thing is for us to simply *be* together, that's what we'll do.

#7 Framing the issue

To frame an issue is to pull the core meaning of the current discussion, dilemma or task from the chaos of a moment and to articulate it in a way that facilitates understanding. Framing the issue might involve clarifying which topic should be the focus of discussion vs. simply a re-hashing of an old dynamic that lead you into the weeds. Framing might also take the form of summarizing a dilemma and challenges you face in navigating it. The more clearly we are able to frame the issue, the more likely we, our clients and our colleagues will be able to move efficiently forward in the process.

Examples:

#1

"I think this discussion is not so much about length of spousal support and more about when Lynn will be able to go back to work. Lynn - Can we talk about your plans and what a realistic time frame might be for getting your degree, and finding your first job?"

#2

"We've spend almost an hour talking about how the two of you are going to spend time with your kids over winter break this year, even though you both came in today saying you wanted to work efficiently. I think we're up against the understandable problem that on the one hand you want to move forward with your parenting plan, and on the other hand it's painful and difficult to imagine losing time with your kids, especially during special holidays."

#8 Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is the verbal equivalent of standing very close to a client – as close as we can without being literally in their shoes. Repeating something someone says, sticking close his or her own words without sounding (or feeling) like a parrot, is the goal of this technique. Leading into a paraphrase with a comment like, "Just to make sure I am tracking you...." can be helpful. It can be useful to summarize a bit (since that requires

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you to organize and condense your clients' thought—itself a helpful technique. But be sure to let your client know you're keenly aware you may get it wrong and are open to feedback ("Let me know if I'm off base, but I think the heart of what you're saying is..."). The more fragile or rigid client your client, the less deviation from their original phrasing they'll be able to tolerate. Paraphrasing is one of the building blocks of conveying empathy. So it has to be authentic, and it has to be accurate. Don't worry about sounding pat. If you feel the truth of what you are saying it will "go in," if you don't, it won't. Better to be silent than to talk simply because you think it's your turn.

Example:

CLIENT: "My husband's house is such a mess I'm worried the kids will flunk out of school if they have to study there. No way are they staying with him during school weeks!"

PROFESSIONAL:

"Wow, so you're saying Karl's house is so chaotic and messy the kids won't be able to work there – which should have an impact on what schedule will be good for them."

#9 Limit setting

As we've pointed out, some clients come in to the process insecure, and have great difficulty building trust. It may be counter-intuitive, but more fragile clients need clearer limits and boundaries because those limits represent reliability and predictability and are the lynchpins of a good holding environment. Even if they rail against you, rigid clients will experience your calm resolve as a sign that you can be trusted and are strong enough to withstand their aggression (a indication that you can help).

Pushing limits might take the form of disrespecting protocols, refusing to do homework, or behaving toward you or your colleagues in a blatantly inappropriate way. But being firm is not the same as being punitive- so tread carefully. Don't retaliate or become patronizing. Be respectful, but don't apologize- stay the course.

Examples:

#1

CLIENT: "I know we're supposed to stop at noon, but I have just a couple more things I need to talk about – can we go until 12:30?"

PROFESSIONAL: "I do need to stop at noon. But let's set up a time to talk tomorrow so we can run through those other issues – does that work?"

#2

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CLIENT: "I'm firing my divorce coach – can you give me the names of other coaches I can call?"

PROFESSIONAL: "Wow – sounds like we have a lot to talk about. I want to understand your concerns about her. Have you talked with your coach about this?"

CLIENT: "No – I'll tell her later, after I retain someone new. I've made up my mind. Done deal. It's my divorce. Move on."

PROFESSIONAL: "You really must have had a negative experience; I want to hear about it. Maybe replacing will turn out to be the right decision, I don't know. But this is an important crossroad in your process, and we both care about your success. Tell me more about why you feel the way you do. Then let's talk about what makes the most sense as next steps."

#3

CLIENT: (Yelling and rising from his chair) "I'm really pissed at you! You're not advocating for me!"

PROFESSIONAL: (Seated, using a calmly firm tone and gesturing to the client's chair) "I want to hear what I've done to upset you, Jon, but I can't listen while you're yelling. Please have a seat and talk to me about this. "

#10 Taking a break

When one or more clients or professionals are emotionally overwhelmed, the authors do not recommend that a professional jump immediately to suggesting they "take a break" (e.g. take a short walk, sit in another office for awhile, use the restroom). We favor staying put long enough to determine if the holding and containment we provide can help clients to stay with us, so that we can make meaning from and work through their experience. But there are times when the intensity becomes counterproductive it makes sense to take a break.

Examples:

- Two or more professionals or clients are incapable (at least in that moment) of not fighting. The hope is the parties involved will calm down and be able to return to the work in more reasonable frames of mind.
- An overwhelmed, flooded client is unable to recover in our presence (or the presence of others in the room)
- An overwhelmed client feels humiliated that his or her emotions are so starkly in evidence.

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#11 Caucusing

There are times when breaking up larger meetings into smaller caucusing groups can be helpful, particularly for moving past impasse.

Examples:

- A client is really ready to relinquish a position but feels too humiliated to do so in the presence of their partner.
- One or more clients need to “reset” within the safer, more intimate Microcontainer provided by their own professional/s.

II. TECHNIQUES THAT ARE USEFUL AND EFFECTIVE ONLY WITH CLIENTS WHO ARE LESS RIGID AND/OR HAVE COME TO VIEW YOU AS A TRUSTWORTHY SAFE BASE

#1 Reframing

If paraphrasing is standing right with a client, reframing is a stretch. It is the verbal equivalent of taking one time step forward, in a direction that we hope will help the client move ahead just a bit, toward change, compromise, clarity or acceptance. The trick to a good reframe is that it is different enough from what the client has just expressed to stretch the client in a helpful direction, but not so different that it elicits anxiety or annoyance in the client. Attempting a reframe is risky when a client is in an highly agitated state, since they are likely flooded, unable to process new information, and vulnerable to feeling emotionally “dropped” by you. Reframing works best when a client is calm enough to be receptive (which, depending on your client, may be possible even when they are also significantly anxious). Reframing is effective only if and when your client already trusts that you are on their side and that you understand and accept the complexity of their often conflicting feelings. A badly timed reframe can at best fall flat and at worst cause a rupture in your relationship with your client.

Example:

CLIENT: “My husband’s house is such a mess I’m worried the kids will flunk out of school if they have to study there. No way are they staying with him during school weeks!”

PROFESSIONAL:

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"Yeah I get it – you have a lot of concerns about the kids, including their ability to stay organized and do well in school when they have to go back and forth. It's hard to imagine that Bob is ever going to get it together, or that the kids could ever adjust."

#2 Reality testing

Like every other "stretching" technique, use this one only if when you know your client well and you have a strong working alliance. The first piece of this technique involves conveying your sense of respect for your client's feelings and opinions *as expressed*. The second piece is involves you (gently) offering a new perspective – offered in a spirit of non-judgmental caring and a desire to be helpful. Before offering reality testing, be sure to reassure your client – especially if they look worried – that you are not feeling critical. Find a way to share your confidence that your client is ready to be challenged a bit. Then share your opinion, perception or new perspective. Reality testing is an offer to expand your client's worldview in a way that will expand their possibilities.

Example:

CLIENT: "My husband's house is such a mess I'm worried the kids will flunk out of school if they have to study there. No way are they staying with him during school weeks!"

PROFESSIONAL:

"I know how worried you have been about Karl's failure to organize his home. I can see how chaotic his life is sometimes – it's pretty apparent to me. I wonder if you would be interested, though, in hearing a slightly different take on the situation that I've been thinking about. I know you want to find a way forward in sharing parenting time with him...I have a perspective that might help us move forward – but it does contrast a bit with your perceptions of him."

CLIENT: "...yeah, I do want to hear your thoughts. But I want you to know how worried this makes me. It's a big deal."

PROFESSIONAL: "It IS a big deal. Your children's adjustment is a HUGE deal. But here's the thing I've been thinking. You've told me how much Karl loves the kids – and how much the boys miss him when they don't see him. Right?"

CLIENT: 'Yeah. True."

PROFESSIONAL: "So, I've just been thinking about what a learning curve Karl has. He has lived for ten years as part of a couple, and you were really the one who kept the trains running on time. You were the one who thought ahead, and who made sure the boys had clean soccer uniforms. Karl is a slob. But...I think he might be trying to get better at day- to-day organization. I think he is motivated to learn how to do some of the things

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you have always done so well. Do you think it's possible that he could get better at this, that he could learn to create enough of a clean home that the boys could spend some time with him during school nights and still be ok – if we give Karl time to practice and [here with bit of a wry smile] maybe the name of a great house cleaner?"

#3 Making links

Making a link is a more advanced version of reframing. When we make a link we are exerting more force-- we draw the client yet further from their safe ways of seeing things. When we link (or draw a connection between) a client's current experience and past experience, we can help them develop new insights, relinquish long-held positions, and experience real transformation. Since making a link is another "stretching" technique – so it will backfire or cause injury if push it before our clients are emotionally ready.

Example:

CLIENT: "My husband's house is such a mess I'm worried the kids will flunk out of school if they have to study there. No way are they staying with him during school weeks!"

PROFESSIONAL:

"I understand your worry – especially because you grew up with a mom who was a hoarder – right? Didn't you tell me that? So no wonder a messy house at Karl's would freak you out. It makes sense that you'd feel particularly protective of your kids when it comes to chaos. It's probably worth our thinking a bit, though, about how much of your concern is based in your experience with you mom, and how much of it is really about Karl. Your mom was incurably chaotic. The question is, could Karl benefit from some time to learn new organizational skills?"

#4 Using tropes

As we get to know our clients over time, we inevitably develop an awareness of unhelpful, idiosyncratic patterns in their ways of relating to us, to their future ex, and to their divorce process. Often these patterns reveal themselves most strongly when our client is under stress. The patterns sometimes reflect stale, repetitive coping mechanisms that echo dynamics from their family of origin and/or their failed marriage. Healthier clients can usually be helped to see these patterns fairly quickly. More rigid clients may be able to see the patterns when you point them out, but have great difficulty modifying their behavior. One of the most useful tools for helping clients at all points on the Rigidity/Flexibility Continuum (healthy clients who are temporarily struggling; rigid clients who are stuck) is the co-construction between you and your client of something we call "tropes". A trope is a well-developed metaphor- a simple way of representing a complicated pattern or idea. It's a recurring, condensed set of ideas represented by a symbolic thought that is a shorthand for a commonly recurring

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theme. It can be a word, an expression or even a sound or an image. For our purposes, we're talking about the development of a secret language shared with your client. This language is an outgrowth of your special alliance and creates a sense of a special connection.

Think of how much fun it is to have "in jokes" with your friends, or sing a spoof at an office party that is hilarious to the group but would mean nothing to people outside the firm. There is something exhilarating a shared complex knowledge that can be expressed simply and that can be understood only by a select few.

A trope serves another crucial function. Think of way that a beloved object- a teddy bear or security blanket- represents to a child the safeness and nurturance of their parents and home. It is a metaphor so powerful that, when stuffed into a backpack and carried along, can make it possible for a child to go alone to their first sleepover. In our context, a trope is an adult version of a security blanket- another kind of transitional object for our clients. A trope comes to represent *you and the containing function that you provide*. The use of the trope, whether it takes the form of a verbal exchange that is actually occurring in the moment, or rather is an idea your client can hold in mind and conjure up as needed, is like an icon in a computer. As our client's minds click on the trope, it expands and allows our client emotional access the to the holding experience that you provide. A trope is a soothing agent. The use of tropes can obviate the necessity for long conversation or between-meeting real-time communication.

Example:

Years ago, Kate worked with a client we'll call Millie. Millie had an ongoing habit of ranting without about the evils of her soon-to-be ex-husband. Her rants derailed meetings as well as her ability to concentrate and complete tasks (including divorce-related. Her ruminations caused her to cancel and be late for meetings, and inhibited her ability think clearly at the Collaborative table. Her undermined her own efforts to protect her children from her bitterness about the divorce. One day, Kate asked Millie if she remembered the song from Sesame Street, "Put Down the Ducky." It was a song Bert - and an entire cast of stars - sang to Ernie when he wanted to learn to play the saxophone but wouldn't put down his rubber ducky. It was a song about managing anxiety in the service of positive change!

Millie recalled the song and was intrigued by Kate asking her about it. Kate suggested that whenever Millie began feeling overwhelmed, she could imagine herself putting "putting down the ducky." So that she could "learn to play the saxophone" - in other words, so she could recover from her divorce and move on in life the way she wanted to.

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Millie loved the idea (she had a good sense of humor.) From then on, whenever Millie started ramping up about her husband's flaws, Kate would whisper something like, "Put that ducky, down, babe" or perhaps, simply mouth the word "ducky." These interventions were highly effective: In one meeting, as Millie's voice started to rise in response to a perceived provocation by her husband, Kate quickly and surreptitiously mimed playing a sax. Millie laughed, and calmed down. Occasionally, Millie sent Kate text messages along the lines of, "Having a rough night. Trying to peel my white knuckled fingers off the ducky." This represented light years of progress, since up then Millie had had a regular habit of inundating Kate with "urgent" calls and emails to which she expected speedy responses but from which she took little comfort

When Millie's case reached settlement, and she had her last meeting with Kate, she gave her a gift-wrapped package inside of Kate found.... a rubber ducky, of course.

#5 Articulating polarities

In our context, a polarity is the dynamic tension between two opposite or contradictory wishes, thoughts, opinions, or tendencies that coexist within one individual or within a couple. Our work is replete with polarities. As a matter of fact, navigating them is exactly what we are doing in the ongoing balancing act of "tending and moving." Noticing and articulating a polarity with compassion and empathy is an important element in helping a client, colleague or couple to resolve the polarity (by relinquishing positions) and choose a path forward.

As with all of these techniques, speaking thoughtfully and carefully and using non-critical or judgmental words and phrases is key.

Examples:

#1

CLIENT: "I have to move out of this damn house, but I'm so afraid of moving into a new place. I'm going in circles."

PROFESSIONAL: "Clearly you are torn. You're so ready for a change – to get on with your life, but it's terrifying to take the next leap! Why don't we talk about both sides...what would it be like to postpone the move, and then what might it feel like to explore nearby apartments?"

#2

CLIENT: I hate the idea of needing him and his money! I'm the original feminist! But I just don't know how I'm going to get back into the work force. I don't know if I can support myself at this age.

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PROFESSIONAL: You are in a tough spot. I can hear you rebelling against the notion of continuing to lean on Barry for financial support – you are fiercely independent. But the reality is you may need to lean on him for a few years, until you get back into teaching. It's hard to be up against two things that might be true – but are sort of in opposition to each other.

#6 Articulating our own uncertainty

There are many moments in our work when we have no idea where to go next. We simply don't know what to do or so. Perhaps we are triggered emotionally, and can't think. Perhaps we are lost in the content of the discussion, or can't track our client-emotionally, cognitively, or both.

Taking time to sort out the source of our confusion not only helps us figure out the most helpful way to intervene, it also sends powerful messages about our trust in the team, our trust in the process, our willingness to be vulnerable, and our belief that meaning can be made from chaotic experience.

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Examples:

#1

PROFESSIONAL (To a client): "I'm having a hard time reading you...I'm not sure what might be most helpful right now."

#2

PROFESSIONAL: (To colleagues and clients in the room.) "So we all went from talking about one thing to talking about a totally different thing. I'm wondering if I'm the only person who is having trouble tracking. Can we push pause for a 'sec to figure out where we are?"

#3

PROFESSIONAL: (To another professional in the room) "I'm not sure how to be most helpful right now. Do you have any thoughts about what we should do with our last fifteen minutes?"

#7 Use of silence

Allowing space for our clients to think, react – to fill the space in any way they wish – is sometimes hard for professionals. But allowing silence to build is one of our most powerful tools. Remaining quiet following a particularly anguished moment can convey respect for the profound feelings in the room – feelings that cannot easily be addressed with words. Restraint from speaking when clients are struggling to find their way forward leaves space for them to master a task and experience the resultant satisfaction- a transformative experience. Remaining silent also leaves room for others in the room who may process at varying speeds but have something important to contribute. On the other hand, it is important to remember that fragile, and highly anxious clients may have a tough time tolerating silence, and may even interpret it as indifference. Silence, like any particularly powerful tool, has to be used carefully, and with thought.

By the way, don't make the mistake of confusing silence with inaction. Sitting still while remaining emotionally attuned is one of the most active (and often difficult) techniques of all.