The Challenge of Counseling Teens: 
Techniques for Engaging and Connecting with Reluctant Youth

Leader Guide and Session Transcripts

By John Sommers-Flanagan, Ph.D.
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Part One:  Introduction and Overview

This videotape has two main objectives. First, the tape is designed to educate beginning and experienced mental health practitioners regarding general strategies and specific techniques for working with older teenagers. Second, the tape is designed to stimulate discussion regarding common issues that arise when adult mental health providers provide counseling to teenagers.

The Challenge of Counseling Teens videotape provides glimpses into actual counseling sessions with six different teenagers. These teenagers are ages 16-18 and, at the time of the taping, were in a voluntary residential facility for youth pursuing specific educational and vocational goals. Although the clients are in a voluntary placement setting and have volunteered to have their counseling sessions videotaped, the video clips illustrate many common challenges that mental health providers face when working with both agreeable and challenging teenagers.

Before and after each video clip, we (John and Rita Sommers-Flanagan) make a few comments to introduce the upcoming clip and debrief the clip just viewed. We should emphasize that, due primarily to time constraints, we are making only a few surface comments about the video clips and that there are many more topics, issues, and interpersonal dynamics that can be discussed. We encourage you to go far beyond what we say on the video, and most importantly, not to be constrained by our comments in any way. As noted above, a major purpose of this video is to stimulate your thinking and class discussions about The Challenge of Counseling Teens.
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Part Two: Session Description and Discussion Questions

Session 1: Meagan – Demonstration of an Opening Technique

Meagan was selected as a potential volunteer for this project after she attended a large group guidance presentation by John and Rita Sommers-Flanagan. The guidance presentation focused on anger and impulsiveness and Meagan was very talkative and engaged.

This clip is very short and focuses primarily on three separate, but related counseling techniques. First, I (John) open the session with Meagan using a procedure for introductions. Second, I use a particular technique (three wishes) to facilitate goal-setting. Third, I ask Meagan to reflect on and report to me an early memory of a time when she felt very angry.

In addition to the three primary counseling techniques illustrated in this clip, you should take note of my style or approach with this energetic girl. This is not because the style I use is the best or recommended style, but because the style a counselor uses always has an effect on the client’s responses. Below, there are a number of discussion questions that will guide you and your students through your reactions to the client, to the techniques used, and to my style and approach with her.

During this session opening and during several of the openings illustrated on this videotape, I begin by acknowledging that Meagan and I are strangers, that we don’t know each other very well. This opening is simply an acknowledgment of reality and is used because teenagers often find it to be a bit of relief when an adult simply and directly acknowledges the reality of a situation.

Very early in the session, Meagan and I decide together to focus on her anger for the remainder of the session. I then ask her to describe an early memory of being very angry. This “early memory” technique is derived partly from Adlerian theory (Eckstein, 1999). However, the suggestion that Meagan focus on an “angry” early memory is an example of an “affect bridge.” The affect bridge technique was originally described by John G. Watkins (1971), a renowned hypnotherapist.

Meagan responds to the affect bridge technique by describing two different childhood anger episodes. Whether you agree with using a historically-oriented question or not, my purpose was to gather data to help me conceptualize her anger “buttons” or “triggers” or “activating events” (which is a reasonable purpose based on contemporary cognitive-behavioral anger management strategies; Ellis, 1987; Novaco, 1979). It may be interesting for you to discuss with your class whether using the historically-oriented affect bridge is acceptable from your personal therapeutic framework or theoretical orientation.

Although you don’t have an opportunity to watch this session (or any of the sessions) in its entirety, the remainder of the session includes the following:

- After the historical questions, I ask Meagan for a current anger example
- I use a case conceptualization technique with Meagan, wherein I tell her that I think her main “button” is related to having a strong reaction to acts of injustice (toward her or toward others). I use this conceptualization even though I recognize that there are also un-articulated abandonment and humiliation issues linked to her early memories of being angry. The main reasons for this choice include (a) the fact that we’re on video; (b) the brief nature of our counseling relationship; and (c) the fact that the deep issues come out so early.
• Meagan is very responsive to being described as a person very sensitive to injustice. She also resonates well with the idea of wanting to “teach others a lesson” when they engage in unjust or unfair behaviors.

• Toward the end of the session, I lead Meagan through a very brief relaxation procedure.

• The session ends with me giving Meagan an “identity suggestion.” Specifically, I ask her to consider that her idea of herself as someone who gets angry easily and quickly might be growing outdated. Instead, I ask her to begin thinking of herself as the kind of person who is calm and happy. I also ask her to keep practicing some breathing or relaxation techniques.

Discussion Questions
1. As Rita Sommers-Flanagan asked on the videotape, what is your reaction to Meagan as a prospective client? How do you think you might feel if you worked with her on an ongoing basis?
2. What are your thoughts or reactions to the opening that John used with Meagan? Do you agree that the acknowledgment of being strangers is a facilitative technique, or might it have some negative affects?
3. Do you think the three wishes goal-setting activity was effective? What was your reaction to John joking with her about the number of wishes she could have?
4. Meagan and John agree rather quickly on which issue to work on during the session. Did you feel this agreement was completely mutual or was John (or Meagan) doing more of the leading?
5. After identifying anger as the topic of concern, John quickly employs an “affect bridge,” asking Meagan to describe an early anger experience. What do you think of this beginning? What theoretical orientation might use this sort of opening? Is it consistent with a behavioral or solution-focused approach? More importantly, if a counselor is going to use a behavioral or solution-focused approach, would it be acceptable to use this sort of question where the client is asked to reflect on her early anger experiences? Do you think this beginning is useful, irrelevant, or possibly anti-therapeutic?
6. What are your thoughts on John’s early reflection of feeling with Meagan (i.e., when he tells her that she looked sad when she talked about being teased by her brother and sister)? What do you think the function (or consequence) of this reflection of feeling is during this session?
7. Toward the end of the clip, John makes a point of identifying Meagan’s feelings of embarrassment and anger. Again, what do you think is the purpose of these feeling reflections and do you think they are useful or not?
8. If you were to complete this session with Meagan, how would you help her conceptualize the “triggers” or “buttons” that lead to her anger outbursts?
9. Later in this session, John works with Meagan to help her identify the fact that she often gets angry in response to situations where she feels personally mistreated or treated in an unjust manner. Meagan seems to understand this dynamic and they spend time discussing her impulses to “teach other people lessons” if she perceives them treating others or herself in an unfair or unjust manner. What do you think of this strategy for helping Meagan “conceptualize” her anger and her retributive impulses?
10. At a deeper level, it might be worthwhile to focus on Meagan’s feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, or abandonment to help resolve her anger (each of
these emotional issues seem to underlie the stories she tells about her anger). In the portion of the session not shown on the tape, John chooses to work on the more general level (injustice and revenge impulses) regarding her anger dynamics. Which level would you choose to work on and why?

11. What might be the reasons why John would recognize the deeper emotional issues, but choose instead, to work on the more surface or general issues? Discuss this in terms of possible countertransference, as well as issues related to time-limited or brief counseling.

Session 2: Sean – Demonstration of an Opening, Early Interpretation, and Role Reversal

Similar to Meagan, Sean was selected following his participation in a large group guidance session conducted by myself and Rita Sommers-Flanagan. Again, similar to Meagan, Sean was very engaged in the guidance session and asked “What do you do if you’re angry all the time?” a question that he felt “stumped” us. He was selected for this session because of his natural expression of interest in managing his anger.

This session initially illustrates an opening strategy. Once again, I acknowledge the reality that Sean and I are virtual strangers.

Because I already know what Sean wants to work on, I decide not to use a goal-setting technique like I did with Meagan and instead simply ask Sean to describe what he likes and dislikes. I also seek his permission to do so by asking: “So, I’ll just do that if that’s okay?”

In this case (but not always), Sean responds in a manner that gives me a quick insight into what might be generating his perpetual anger and rather than wait and slowly let this dynamic come to the surface, I use an early interpretation to tell Sean that I think his problem revolves around his perfectionism (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004b). Sean's response to this early interpretation is generally positive and we basically work throughout the remainder of the session on his perfectionism and anger.

As Rita notes on the video, this “early interpretation” technique is not without risk. It is somewhat intuitive and spontaneous and potentially provocative. It has the advantage of helping therapists and clients conceptualize a problem early on in a session, which is especially helpful when conducting time-limited therapy. But, it can also turn-off or shut down clients from talking more openly about their problems. This is why it is a potentially important discussion point for your class.

The rest of the video clip focuses mostly on a self-rating procedure and a role-reversal technique. During the self-rating technique, Sean reveals some cognitive inconsistency regarding his self-evaluation process (i.e., although he might give himself a 100%, he would never give himself an “A”). Albert Ellis would likely refer to Sean’s rating of himself as “irrational” while Aaron Beck would identify it as “maladaptive” (Ellis, 1962; Beck 1976). Either way you conceptualize it, this sort of distorted cognitive self-appraisal process is not unusual among perfectionistic individuals with anger problems.

When I ask Sean to be my counselor as I work on an issue similar to his, he takes the role very seriously. During this process, I share with him a story about when I lost my temper and he listens intently. He then appears to try his best to offer up advice for me on how to possibly resolve my anger problem.

Although the main purpose of a role reversal technique with angry clients might be to enhance perspective taking (a cognitive component of empathy), Sean’s case illustrates how the technique also is useful for helping access a more compassionate and gentle side of the angry client. Then, with this kinder side exposed, it is sometimes possible to encourage the client to use the more compassionate “voice” when talking with himself about his anger. This is part of what we focus on during the rest of the session.
The other main part of the session not viewed involves me giving Sean a specific assignment that I tell him “I think can help you overcome or at least diminish” his anger. This assignment is for him to think about how other people are doing and feeling when he engages in activities that often cause him to get angry. This type of assignment is derived from Adlerian theory (see Adler, 1964, pp. 25-26 or Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004a, pp. 99-100, for more information). For example, we discuss how he might try, the next time he plays basketball, to take the role of team captain and figure out how he can encourage the rest of the players (in a gentle and positive manner) to play their best (rather than solely focusing on his own performance). It is hoped that by shifting his cognitive focus from himself to his friends, that he might gain more control over his anger.

At the end of the clip, Sean tells a story about when he was with his mother and some strangers made racist comments that Sean found personally offensive. This story seems to just bubble out of Sean and seems to contain significant emotional material. In particular, there is material suggesting that Sean felt a lack of support and a lack of understanding from his mother. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint in general and a self psychology viewpoint in particular, the appearance of this story is a sign that trust is building, that Sean is perhaps feeling listened to and understood, and that the therapists most healing strategy, at the moment, should be to use empathic listening or mirroring of Sean’s feelings (Kohut, 1984, p. 69). In addition, at some point, it might be helpful if the therapist mirrored back to Sean his feelings of being partially unsupported and partially misunderstood by his mother.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your reaction to the different opening that John uses in this session? Do you like the goal-setting procedure better or this more informal opening gambit?
2. What is your reaction to the “early interpretation” technique that John uses to formulate Sean’s anger problem within the first four minutes of the session? Do you agree or disagree with his formulation? How might this formulation stifle or restrict the counseling process? How might this formulation facilitate the counseling process?
3. What do you think of Sean’s reaction to the early interpretation technique? Does he respond in a positive or negative or neutral manner?
4. The self-rating activity that used with Sean produces a very interesting result. What do you think of this result and what do you think of the response given back to Sean (basically, John appears, at first, incredulous, and then accepting)? Do you think it would be more therapeutic to more directly dispute Sean’s cognitive distortion, as Albert Ellis might? How might Aaron Beck, based on his approach to cognitive therapy, respond to Sean’s cognitive distortion?
5. Sean appears to take the counseling role reversal very seriously. What would you do if you suggested this activity to a teenager client and he or she refused to participate, or did so without any enthusiasm or interest?
6. Sean gets stuck in his efforts to help John with his perfectionistic anger. What are your thoughts about how and when John ends the role reversal activity?
7. After the role play, Sean is critical of his performance as a “psychologist.” John’s response is to be openly supportive of him. What do you think of that sort of direct support in this situation?
8. At one point during the clip, John goes into a long self-disclosure about losing his temper in a basketball game. What are the pros and cons of using this sort of self-disclosure?
9. What do you make of the final story that Sean tells, where he is offended by racist comments made by two strangers and then feels a lack of support and understanding from his mother? How would you handle this disclosure in a session with Sean?

Session 3: Michael – A Multicultural Opening, Getting it Wrong, Sharing Spontaneous Imagery, and Positive Feedback.

Michael, an African/Puerto Rican American male has a history of gang involvement and anger problems. Prior to this recorded session, I had met with Michael once and he attended a large group guidance session I conducted in his dormitory.

The opening of this session is also a major focus. Because we have different cultural backgrounds, I begin with another acknowledgement of reality. This time, I acknowledge to Michael that we’re different and ask him to tell me some of what it’s been like for him to be himself and to be in a gang. At one point, I even state, “I’m not African American.” Eventually, Michael takes a deep breath and then shares a significant amount of information about his gang involvement.

Early in the session I repeatedly try to accurately reflect the content of what Michael is saying and he repeatedly corrects me. Finally, after “getting it wrong” several times, I tell Michael that I’m guessing about what he’s meaning and I thank him for correcting me when I get it wrong (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004b).

Toward the middle of the session, Michael makes it clear that he will not change his style of dressing (which is somewhat gangster-like). Shortly afterwards, I get an image in my mind of him dressed like me and me dressed like him and I share it with him. This sort of spontaneous self-disclosure may be a facilitative factor in multicultural counseling (Sue & Sue, 2003, p. 147). His response is to erupt with laughter and then tell me that he’d never dress like me, but that I’d look pretty good if I dressed like him.

During a part of the session not shown, Michael and I focus on his tendency to react with anger and aggressiveness toward people who judge him negatively. We also talk about his self-esteem and how he called himself “stupid” during a recent classroom guidance activity in his dormitory. Eventually, I made the case with him that I thought he would benefit from feeling so strong and good about himself down deep that he would be less affected by people who say negative or sarcastic things about him.

At the end of the tape I, once again, go back to differences between Michael and myself, but also point out some similarities. I also give him direct feedback and open support in saying that he should never think of himself as “stupid.”

Discussion Questions
1. What are your thoughts about the opening used with Michael? Do you think it is appropriate or inappropriate for John to acknowledge our differences and then to ask him to describe of his “different” experiences?
2. How did you feel about John’s statement “I’m not African American” as used in the opening?
3. As you listen to Michael describe some of his gang experiences, how are you affected? How do you think you would respond to what he’s saying about himself, his life, and some of the decisions he’s made?
4. What is your reaction to John’s repeated incorrect “reflections of content” with Michael? Is he being difficult or is John simply getting most of the reflections wrong?
5. Eventually, John acknowledges the fact that he’s getting many reflections of content incorrect and thanks Michael for correcting him. What do you think of that strategy? What other strategy or technique might you use in similar situations?

6. When John tells Michael that he had an image of him dressed “just like me” helpful or potentially therapeutic? What might make such a statement therapeutic? What might make such a statement too risky? What might be the meta-communication behind John’s disclosure to Michael? Do you think Michael might think John is saying “You should be more like me?”

7. What do you make of Michael’s laughter when John shares the image of seeing him dressed like him? What does it mean when he responds by saying that John would look good dressed like him, but that he would never dress like John? Do you think John should have pressed Michael on the fact that he had never tried dressing like John and so perhaps he should, rather than just saying that “it’s not my style?”

8. At the end, John provides Michael with open support and strong reassurance for his intelligence. What do you think of John emphasizing that he is a “psychologist” and can speak with authority about the fact that Michael is smart?

9. What do you think of Michael’s reaction to John’s positive feedback?

Session 4: Krystan – What’s Good About You?

Krystan is a 16-year-old who describes herself as “bitchy.” I had seen her for one session prior to the meeting on the videotape. In the prior session and at the beginning of this session, Krystan talked at length about problems with her boyfriend and about her moodiness. Early in this session I talked with Krystan about how she is sort of a sponge and/or mirror, because she soaks up the emotion or mood of others around her and she gives back to others what she perceives them “giving” her. Unfortunately, this soaking up and giving back process for her is often very negative.

We also talked about how vulnerable this style makes her to the moods and statements of other people. As a consequence, I use a specific technique with her, one where she is required to generate 10 positive statements about herself. My goal in using this technique is to help develop her inner resources and positive feelings about herself, rather than having her continue to rely on others for outside feedback. In addition, this technique is often used as an informal assessment procedure (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1997).

Discussion Questions

1. From the very beginning of the “What’s Good About You?” activity, Krystan struggles a bit in generating positive self-statements. Do you think it is appropriate or helpful to let her struggle like she does? In other words, should John just keep proceeding with “What’s Good About You?” or stop and provide emotional support and encouragement?

2. When Krystan says she can’t think of anything, John writes that down and tells her she can use that “I can’t think of anything” response only once. Subsequently, she seems to do better at generating a few positive statements. Why do you think she gains momentum and improves a bit in generating positive statements?

3. What are your thoughts on the content of Krystan’s positive self-statements? What does the content of her self-statements say about her (as a form of an assessment)?

4. At the end of the series of positive statements, John tells Krystan that he has some additional positive things to say about her. What do you think of this strategy?

5. What do you think of the positive things John ends up saying to Krystan? What do you think of her reaction? Does she accept or reject John’s positive feedback?
6. Where would you go with Krystan in counseling after this point? What issues do you think she should work on and how would you proceed with her to address those issues?

Session 5: Mike – Persistent Perspective-Taking

I had never met Mike before our session. His appointment was scheduled by the school nurse and neither he nor I were clear about the purpose of his visit or his personal goals. During the beginning of this session, Mike and I struggled to identify anything of personal significance to talk about. At the point where the tape begins is the first time when Mike directly asked for assistance. Up until that point, he had primarily talked about how things were going fine in his life.

Mike finally asks for help understanding teachers and describes that he thinks they’re being fake. My response to him is to briefly slip into a reflective listening mode and then ask him to “pretend” that he is a teacher and to describe how he would act. Mike cooperates fully with this request.

Mike concludes that he would probably just “be himself” as a teacher but also acknowledges “I don’t know.” I explore this with him briefly and then share my perspective and how I might “try too hard” with students because I want them to like me and learn from me. Mike appears to closely follow what I’m saying.

Somewhat later, in a general summary, I slip in the statement, “...sometimes you don’t trust people very well, but you’re working on it.” I then move back to a different perspective-taking situation, one involving social rejection. This new situation is based on some material that he mentioned earlier in the session.

Mike appears very genuine, forthright, and engaged in the therapy process. He also eventually admits that he has used people to get what he wants and that he has pushed them away because he feels they are too good for him. An interesting thought that crossed my mind in working with him (but that remained unsaid) was the possibility that he is often fake with people in ways that he worries they are fake with him.

In the end, Mike seems very open to the learning that he apparently obtained during the counseling session.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your reaction to John’s initial response to Mike’s direct question to be helped to understand teachers? Why do you think John is initially just reflecting Mike’s feelings, rather than answering his question directly?

2. When John finally moves away from reflective listening, he still doesn’t answer Mike’s question directly, but instead asks him to pretend to be a teacher. Is this an assessment technique or a therapeutic perspective-taking technique and does the distinction matter?

3. In the midst of a general summary statement, John says to Mike, “sometimes you don’t trust people very well, but you’re working on it.” In some ways this interpretation seems to come out of the blue (but it’s also consistent with the theme that Mike finds teachers to be fake or phony). What do you think of how John uses a negative statement about Mike in a positive way?

4. During the same summary, John comments that Mike is “a pretty smart guy” and that he can figure things out. Do you agree? Do you think it’s a good idea to tell teenage clients that they’re “pretty smart” in the absence of objective test data?
5. As John moves back into additional perspective taking with Mike, he frequently uses questions to check in with how Mike is viewing things. How do you feel about this use of questions and do you think it is effective with Mike?

6. Mike seems genuine in admitting that “I’ve done that” with regard to pulling back and rejecting others in social situations. Is he really being genuine or is he simply saying what he thinks his therapist wants to hear? In other words, is there a possibility that one of Mike’s big challenges is being genuine, which is the very same issue that he wonders about with teachers?

Session 6: Andrea – Interpretation, Muscle Metaphor, and Homework Assignment

Prior to this taped session, I had met twice with Andrea. Nevertheless, of all the students recorded for this videotape, Andrea was the most camera conscious. She frequently turned toward and looked directly at the close-up camera while speaking and intermittently spoke as if she was addressing an audience.

Andrea was also defensive throughout the session. She was cautious about admitting to having any problems to talk about on camera. She was occasionally sarcastic and during the session I had the feeling that she was consistently “playing” with me and trying to keep me at a distance. As a consequence, for most of the session I struggled to work productively with her on any issue. Finally, toward the end of the session, she admitted that she understood a point that I had been trying to make repeatedly during the session.

Andrea also attended the large group guidance session that Rita and I had conducted with groups of about 50 students two weeks prior to the videotaped session. It was especially interesting that Andrea, despite her previous contact with me (or perhaps because of it), had covered up her head under her hood during the presentation and either feigned sleeping or actually fell asleep. She was the only student of over 200 who engaged in such a clearly disrespectful manner during the large guidance groups. Intermittently during the session, I identified this behavior and tried to use it to help her understand how she affects others interpersonally. Specifically, I told her that when she covered her head with her hood that I had felt slightly hurt. Instead of expressing empathy for my feeling hurt, she teased me about it. Later, I tried to explain to her that sometimes if she behaves disrespectfully, she might hurt other people’s feelings and their response might be to “get her back” by being mean or judgmental toward her. She expressed little interest or understanding of this potential interpersonal process.

At the point where the tape begins, I am repeating to Andrea a part of my main interpretation – that she keeps people at a distance by acting like they don’t really matter to her. Finally, Andrea admits that she understands what I mean and then I set out to deepen her understanding by using the muscle metaphor (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004b).

Andrea seems to understand the muscle metaphor, but then makes great fun of it, using her sarcastic, somewhat intimidating style. Subsequently, I try to point out that she is enacting her “You don’t matter to me” style right in the room (a transference interpretation). Of course, Andrea resists this interpretation and although I ask her to give me a compliment, she never really manages to do so. In the end, I settle for giving her a homework assignment to compliment other people and she agrees to try it out by giving one compliment “per person.”

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of John’s direct interpretation of what he identifies as Andrea’s tendency to act like other people don’t matter to her.
2. John seems to enjoy working with Andrea (and claims to like working with difficult or resistant youth). As you watch Andrea, how do you think you would feel working with her? What would you want to say to her?

3. When John is asking Andrea about the size of her muscles and why her right arm might be stronger than her left, she responds by saying “Because I jack off.” How would you respond to this comment? What do you think of John’s response?

4. What do you think of the muscle metaphor in general as a technique for helping youth to work on their weaknesses?

5. Later, when John asks a personal question, Andrea claims he is speaking in metaphor and being indirect. Do you think he was being indirect?

6. After being accused of being indirect, John gets serious and clear in his question to Andrea, restating several versions to her. What is your impression of the interpersonal dynamic in the room at that point? Is John reacting to Andrea with a little countertransference?

7. What do you think of John’s transference interpretation (when he tells Andrea that she’s “doing it” in the session)? Then, what do you think of his effort to get her to give him some positive feedback? Do you think that Andrea really enjoyed the session on a personal level, but is just resisting giving John a compliment? If so, why do you think she would do this? What interpersonal dynamics might it represent?

8. In the end, John manages to ask Andrea to do a homework assignment and she agrees to try it (although minimally). Do you think she will really follow through?
Part Three: Session Transcripts

John: My name is John Sommers-Flanagan. I’m a counselor educator at the University of Montana and have training in clinical psychology. For many years, I have immensely enjoyed working with challenging teenagers, although it might be more accurate to say that I almost always immensely enjoyed my work with them. Before moving to the video clips, I want to give my sincere thanks to the six teenagers who, due to their generosity, allowed us to video them while they worked with me in counseling. They were open, they were responsive, they were more than I could have asked for, and so this tape couldn’t have been possible without their contribution. I also would like to thank my wife and colleague, Dr. Rita Sommers-Flanagan, and she is here to share some of her comments and wisdom about the video clips that we’re going to be watching together.

Rita: This first clip that we’ll watch together shows John doing an opening technique with a very interesting young woman. What should we watch for, John?

John: Well, I had asked this girl to work with me and I haven’t met her before, and so I found that even in the video set-up, that I started kind of absorbing or reacting to her energy, ’cause she’s pretty lively and pretty active. And I know when I watched the video, the whole thing, much of which won’t be shown on this tape, that I got overactive and directive and found myself strongly affected by her energy.

Rita: Yeah, I think, I of course watched the tape too, and I think it would be very interesting for you as viewers to really imagine herself in the room with this young client and monitor your own responses.

John: So Meagan, you know, we’re kind of strangers. I mean, I think we don’t know each other well.

Meagan: No.

John: We’ve just barely met, and so I would just like to try to be of some help in some way if you want that, in our time together, and I’d like you to start, you could just tell me some of your goals, if you have some.

Meagan: In my life right now?

John: Goals in your life right now, goals, you know, let’s say you could make a wish.

Meagan: Okay.

John: Maybe three wishes. Heck, five wishes, I don’t know. Three wishes. Three wishes for ways that you might change or improve yourself.
Meagan: Myself. Myself as a person or myself physically, or just me?
John: Anyway you want to answer that.
Meagan: Well, my first one would probably be, able to predict my future.
John: Okay.
Meagan: See where I’ll end up.
John: You’d like to know where you’re gonna end up in the future?
Meagan: I got, I’ve got an idea, but you know, some things happen.
John: What’s your idea?
Meagan: Make a lot of money.
John? Yeah?
Meagan: Yeah, and have a nice house.
John: And that’s what you think is gonna happen, you’re gonna make a fair amount of money and have a decent house?
Meagan? I should like, yeah, I should.
John: Okay. That’s number 1.
Meagan: Yeah, that’s number 1. My second, maybe my anger.
John: Okay.
Meagan? My anger problem. I have a little temper sometimes, some control over that. People...just people make me mad.
John: You seem so relaxed and calm now, but what you’re saying is that sometimes
Meagan: Sometimes, not all the time.
John: Yeah, sometimes people really tick you off.
Meagan: Yeah.
John: Okay.
Meagan: And, um the third one - maybe not be so outgoing all the time. I don’t know. I’m really outgoing and, you know I just do weird things and people just get
intimidated by it and they don’t want to talk to me sometimes. I’m really outgoing.

John: So the down side on that is you’re so outgoing that sometimes it puts people off.

Meagan: Yeah. Just like they wouldn’t want to be around me cause I you know...

John: You’re too outgoing.

Meagan? Yeah, I’m too out there. You know what I mean? You understand?

John: Yeah.


John: You’re very extroverted and very outgoing and some people can’t handle it very well.

Meagan: Yeah, and it’s just how I am. I can’t help it. I mean, I don’t want to change for other people.

John: Sure.

Meagan: It’s not gonna happen.

John: You are who you are and that’s a thing you don’t really need to, or don’t think you need to or want to change.

Meagan: hmm umm.

John: So of those three, okay, as much as I would like to say I could help you make money and tell your future, foretell your future, maybe we’ll get to that, but I think the easiest thing for us to focus on would be the anger.

Meagan: Anger yeah.

John: Because here’s what my goal is. My goal is to help you accomplish your goals, as long as they’re legal and healthy.


John: Fair enough?

Meagan: Yeah, fair.

John: I hear the anger one as being pretty legal and pretty healthy.

Meagan: Anger management?
John: Yeah.

Meagan: Okay.

John: So tell me, I'm gonna ask you some questions about the anger stuff. When was the first time. How old were you when you felt like "aahh, I've got this temper" or somebody told you that you've got a temper?

Meagan: Wow, um I have short-term memory so I'm gonna try, but sometimes I just can't remember that far. It was probably like third grade. Well, no, yeah, it was like third grade I beat up my sister.

John: Older or younger sister?

Meagan: Older. Older.

John: You beat her up?

Meagan: Cause she tried to beat me up, so I jumped on her stomach a few times. I felt really bad though. Like I cried for days in my sleep. You know, cause I felt really bad. I kept apologizing to her and apologizing to her. It would keep coming up to me. A few months later, "Gosh, I'm so sorry about what happened that one time." She'd be like "oh, it's okay", or "that was dumb, but it's okay."

John: So that's an example of pretty early.

Meagan: Yeah, um that I can remember. But you know I bet if I had more time I'd probably...

John: Go back even before.

Meagan: Yeah, even before. Oh wait, once when I was four my brother and sister used to play Keep Away from Meagan and they'd run away from me and jump fences. I was four years old, I couldn't chase after them, I couldn't jump a fence. I was four and it made me angry. You know, that one and the other one that I could think of.

John: When you say that second one, um, you sounded sad.

Meagan: Yeah, it made me sad too.

John: Yeah.

Meagan: I think more angry, you know.

John: Sure.

Meagan: I was really young though. The one, you know, that really comes to my mind that I was very angry was the first one, just because...
John: In third grade?

Meagan: Yeah, third grade.

John: Your sister was trying to beat you up.

Meagan: She was trying to like, um embarrass me, you know, and make me look like it was nothing cause she had older friends, or something like that. Like make me look stupid in front of my friends.

John: Okay.

Meagan: So that made me very p-o’d and I chased her around the school yard and cornered her and started jumping on her stomach. Everyone’s like, “yeah yeah yeah” (claps), you know like cheering me on. Then we went and sat at the corner of the school and yeah. I got in trouble.

John: Yeah.

Meagan: Yeah, I still think about that.

John: And so the first, the early one when you were four kind of made you sad and mad. And the second one sounds like it maybe embarrassed you more.

Meagan: Yeah, I was embarrassed at what I did. That’s the word. Yeah. That’s exactly how I felt because I didn’t, you know, want people to think, I don’t know, I just hated my sister. Which I kind of do.

John: But you were embarrassed though, she tried to embarrass you, is what I was saying. So embarrassed, and then mad, and then embarrassed.

Meagan: And then embarrassed that I did it.

John: Right.

Meagan: So I was feeling, you know, two types of, you know, embarrassment.

John: Embarrassment on both ends of the mad.

Meagan: Mm hmm. I didn’t love her very well.

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John: Now, Rita, you suggested before watching this clip that viewers put themselves in my shoes and see how they imagined feeling.
Rita: Yeah, I definitely noticed, even just watching the video tape, I felt agitated myself and some need to exercise control or get her to relax or speed up myself. It definitely had an effect on my sense of working with her.

John: My impression is that oftentimes teenagers, with their different energy levels and attitudes, have a strong effect on the counselor, and so this is a time when you could pause the tape for some discussion, if you would like.

John: In this next clip, I am counseling a boy named Sean, who has actually asked to come and talk with me because he's angry all the time. Now, you've seen the clip.

Rita: Umm hmm.

John: So do you have anything you think we should watch for?

Rita: Yeah. There are actually several things. First, of course there's not the same introduction because the therapy issues have been identified. Next, I think it will be interesting for you, the viewers, to look at John's use of a very early interpretation or case formulation. You'll notice that it comes very early and is very definitive. And finally, you might want to watch for John's work with the kind of role reversal work to increase his apathy.

John: So, I don't know you, you don't know me. Basically, we're kind of strangers. So, you know, I, I have different ways of trying to get to know people. One is just to ask you some things about what you like and what you don't like.

Sean: Alright.

John: So, I'll just do that if that's okay.

Sean: That'll work.

John: Okay. So now I'm gonna sometimes write things down, not always, but write a few things down. So, tell me, what's your favorite thing to do? Favorite recreational activity?

Sean: Um, there's a couple things. I like playing football. I like playing basketball. Um, I like to draw and write music.

John: Yeah? You like music, not lyrics?

Sean: Um, lyrics.

John: Both. Write lyrics, okay.
Sean: And that’s about it.

John: Yeah. So those are the things you really like. Enjoy a lot.

Sean: Mmm hmm.

John: How about some things you hate? Sometimes you can tell a lot about somebody by finding out some things that they just hate.

Sean: The same things.

John: You hate football, you hate basketball, you hate drawing?

Sean: Those are my favorite things to do but they make me mad.

John: Yeah?

Sean: Cause I get frustrated when I like, when I play basketball if I don’t play so well, it’ll make me mad. Well, you know. I like to be QB when I play football. If I don’t get a good pass or if somebody drops it I get mad. Um, when I draw if I can’t think of nothin’ to draw or mess up, I get mad. Or um, when I’m writing music if I can’t think of anything I get writer’s block, I get really mad. So, yeah, they’re like my worst things to do, like what somebody wouldn’t want me to do, but they’re my favorite things to do, so I do them anyways.

John: That’s interesting. So, I can tell you what the issue is already.

Sean: Alright.

John: You ready?

Sean: Yeah.

John: So, you know what the problem is about anger for you? You’re a perfectionist.

Sean: I don’t try to be. I don’t really mean to be, though.

John: Yeah.

Sean: I don’t like to be because if I don’t play as good as I want to play in basketball, for example. If I miss a shot and I know I can make it, I know I should make it, it makes me mad. I mean really mad. I don’t just be like “oh darn” you know, I’m a little mad now. I’ll flip out.

John: You think you should do things right all the time.

Sean: Yeah.
John: Yeah, that’s tough. Man, you’ve got a huge burden.

Sean: Yeah, well I don’t mean to.

John: That’s a lot of pressure.

Sean: Kind of. It’s, it’s a lot of stress cause you know, it’s just kind of you know, the way that I was brought up. You know, I never wanted to lose at anything. I never wanted to be less than anybody. I’ve always wanted to be the best, but I’ve never gotten there yet.

John: When you say the way that you were brought up. What kind of things did you learn growing up?

Sean: That, you know if I didn’t do good, or what not, that I would get picked on for it, or beat on for it by, by peers. By, you know, classmates or whatever.

John: Not by parents.

Sean: No. Never. But, like you know, it just kind of all affected on my from elementary school, cause if I didn’t do everything right I’d always get picked on or beat up for it.

John: Yeah.

Sean: Or, you know, I used to dress like dorky. I never liked this. I was wearing tight jeans and everything when I was little, then I’d got beat up every day. So I finally realized okay I’ll wear some baggy clothes. Maybe they’ll stop beating me up. They didn’t stop beating me up, but they didn’t beat me up as bad.

John: So it worked a little bit.

Sean: Yeah. I mean they still beat me up every day but they didn’t like drop me or anything. They kind of had fun with it. I talked funny too. I talked different than they did.

John: Yeah.

Sean: They’d beat me up for that. So...

John: You got picked on a lot.

Sean: Yeah. That has a lot to do with my anger.

John: Yeah. Why?

Sean: Why?

John: Yeah, why?
Sean: Cause I was small and they could.

John: So it starts off, it's kind of weird. It starts off with you picking on yourself. It's like, well, wait a minute. Um, Sean, everybody misses. You know that.

Sean: Yeah, it's just kind of different in a way. It's like I don't want to miss, ever. You know, I want to be the best player, always, no matter who I'm playing with. And I don't like to get beaten. I don't like to do anything wrong. Cause if I do then it just shows that I'm weak.

John: So the last time you played basketball, on a scale of 0 to 100, what percent of competence of skill would you give yourself?

Sean: I think yesterday I was at ....um

John: 100% would be a perfect day.

Sean: But nope.

John: Okay. Zero would be totally flunked, right?

Sean: I played about 50%.

John: You'd give yourself 50%. Okay, so 50%. And uh, have you ever gotten 100?

Sean: Couple times.

John: So you have a couple of 100's. Okay. When you get 100%, now we're gonna use a grading system, okay? Would you give yourself an A?

Sean: For totally overall, like I've ever been.

John: No, for one of the two times when you played and you think you did 100%, perfect, would you give yourself an A?

Sean: No.

John: You wouldn't give yourself an A?

Sean: No.

John: Why not? 100%, you couldn't do any better.

Sean: I could do better. You could always do better.

John: So you wouldn't ever give yourself 100%?
Sean: No, I’d give myself 100, but you can rate higher than 100%.

John: But you wouldn’t give yourself an A?

Sean: Umm mm. Nah, just because, I wouldn’t give anybody, anybody except for a couple people in the NBA an A if you were grading them on ability, just because it’s so hard to earn that. You can make every shot, but you can’t play your best. Your best is you know, never getting touched, never getting the ball stolen, never getting stuffed. You know, dunkin’ and everything. You got to be able to do it all perfectly.

John: Yeah, can you dunk?

Sean: No, I can touch the rim, but I can’t dunk. Um, you know you it’s, you’ve got to play absolutely perfect without making a single mistake. Ain’t nobody can do that. And that’s more than 100%.

John: Nobody can do that.

Sean: Some people can. I mean, but it’s like you can’t. I don’t know. It’s hard.

John: So, that’s a lot of pressure. To never, ever be able to really think that you got it made. Playing basketball, or football probably. I bet your drawing is similar. It’s never quite perfect.

Sean: Nah. I wish it was.

John: One of my goals here is to help you deal with anger, right? I think the anger’s is about your perfectionism and that you can just never do well enough and so you’re pissed off. I’m not quite sure why you’re so perfectionistic, why it matters so much to you. But that in your mind, I think is kind of, what becomes so important to be perfect, that when you’re not, you’re pissed at yourself and take it out on other people. You with me?

Sean: Yeah.

John: I’m thinking it’s the perfectionism and now I’m just trying to think and maybe, maybe you could pretend that you’re the counselor. Okay? And I’m coming in to see you, and I’m a perfectionist. I’m never happy with my performance. I get pissed. You’re in Dorm 1 so you didn’t hear when my wife told the story about me playing basketball. I think she told that to Dorm 2. And that things weren’t going well and so I kicked the ball across the gym and the ref, of course, course I did that after I told the ref that I thought that maybe he was doing some things wrong, then I kicked the ball across the gym and uh, then he kicked me out of the gym. He’d already kicked me out of the game, and then the gym, and uh, so the ball was actually mine so I took it. It was terribly embarrassing. Terrible story. Okay, so, I need your help. I need your help, because when things don’t go right, when I don’t score 30, when I don’t do things perfectly, I go berserk. How can you help me with this perfectionism problem?
Sean: I don’t know.

John: Give me some advice, give me some advice.

Sean: Why do you, why do you get mad?

John: I get mad because I could do better. I know I could do better. It’s bullshit for me to play the way I play. I can do better. I should win every game.

Sean: Let me think for a second. I’m not a psychologist.

John: Yeah, that’s fine. Being a psychologist, you gotta think.

Sean: Um, okay well, I could say that don’t think about it, don’t think that it’s just a game. But it’s also hard, it’s hard to think like that.

John: So you would tell me to just think it’s just a game?

Sean: Yeah, it’s just a game and there’s no reason to get mad because not everybody’s perfect.

John: Okay.

Sean: But, you know, you probably, but if you were me ...

John: That’s okay, let’s keep going here a sec. So you’re telling me, you’re telling me that I need to think differently. Is that what you’re telling me?

Sean: Not think different, but like um, I’m trying to think how to say it, think outside being perfect. Don’t think different, you know, think the same, but think that as if, you know, that it doesn’t matter.

John: So I need to practice thinking that it doesn’t matter.

Sean: Yeah.

John: But it does. It matters to me, so I need to practice thinking differently. Cause it matters to me now and I think about how much it matters. So what you’re saying is I need to think about it that it doesn’t matter. Let it go.

Sean: Yeah. But it does matter.

John: To me. So, but your point is, change that way of thinking, John, and you’ll feel better. Is that what you’re saying?

Sean: Um, yeah.

John: Okay, okay. What if I can’t?
Sean: It’s hard.
John: It’s hard. So, how do I do it? How do I change the way I’m thinking?
Sean: Play better. No - (laughs)
John: Okay, I'll try. Then I'll fail, and then I'll be even more pissed. Cause now my psychologist told me to play better.
Sean: (laughs) Um, that was a joke?
John: I know.
Sean: Well, you know, what I try to do, you can do what I’m trying to do. Don’t play for a little while, you know. When I play, stop playing, when I play again I’m always a little better. But you can try not playing.
John: Take some time off.
Sean: Or, you know, get some new hobbies.
John: Get some non-competitive hobbies. Well, drawing and writing music, I, you know...
Sean: Well then ...
John: I’d still get pissed about that.
Sean: Well, quit smoking.
John: Do you think smoking is making me more uptight?
Sean: Maybe.
John: It could be. Nicotine can do that.
Sean: Um, yeah, it does.
John: It’s a stimulant.
Sean: Yeah.
John: Do you smoke?
Sean: Yeah.
John: But you should quit, right?
Sean: Yeah.

John: Cause if you were perfect, you could quit.

Sean: I’m working on it. It’s hard to quit. I’m not mad at that because...

John: It’s hard.

Sean: That’s really hard, especially if you’re, it’s almost impossible not to smoke up here.

John: Doesn’t help your basketball game any.

Sean: No, but I’ve been smoking and playing for so long that it doesn’t, to me it doesn’t affect me. I mean know I could play so much better and run so much faster, and jump so much higher cause I’d be able to have more stamina and I wouldn’t get so tired so easy if I quit. It’s just so hard to quit smoking.

John: It’s a drug.

Sean: I hate it, but I like it, but I hate it.

John: So let me ask you this though. I’m gonna be the psychologist again.

Sean: Thank you.

John: You did a pretty good job.

Sean: Not really.

John: Oh, come on. You’ve never been a psychologist before.

Sean: No, but..

John: You came up with one good idea.

Sean: What was that?

John: Change the way I’m thinkin’.

Sean: Yeah, but it’s hard to change the way you think. It’s so hard cause it’s stuck there.

John: No, you’re absolutely right on in terms of what’s one of the main ways that psychologists teach people to not be so pissed off. It’s to change the way they’re thinking. But it’s really hard.

Sean: It takes time.
John: It takes time.

Sean: I mean, I’ve been working on it for 2 ½ years. Try to calm myself down and calm my anger down. And you know I’m getting there, but it’s taking a lot of time for it to do that. You know, when I first moved to Montana with my mom, I was at this bar playing pool. I was listening to some music, some rap. This guy made a really racist comment. I didn’t appreciate it and went up to him and threatened him. And his friend got up and I threatened his friend too. They sat down and my mom took me back to the back, cause she’s all like, cause you know I’m half black, so I didn’t appreciate it at all. Especially coming from where I’m from. From you know a little hick town like that. And you know, I’m not used to it, and I don’t like people making racist comments. And mom took me to the back and tried telling me that you know, these guys are different. This is a different place from where you grew up. I was like, “I don’t care. You know, you don’t say something like that and expect me not to do nothin’ back. Because that offends me. That should offend you too because I’m your son.” She kind of, you know, kind of realized that but kind of not. She’s like, “Well just calm down. If you can’t calm down, then just leave.” I was like ‘oh whatever.’ I just didn’t talk to that guy. And you know, from then to now, I’ve calmed down a lot. I don’t get mad at, you know, the same things I used to. I do, but I don’t flip out as bad as I did. Sometimes I do but sometimes I don’t. It just takes a lot of time for me to...

John: to work on it.

Rita: So, John, I have to say that, that early interpretation, is something I struggle with. It’s not something I could personally use myself, but I can see how it works for you, although I think my biggest concern is that if you used it with a client who didn’t have the strength to react or resist, it could be kind of all about you.

John: Yeah, I think there is a risk in that and what I’ve found is that sometimes when I have this kind of intuitive insight about a young person with whom I’m working, it just almost bubbles up in me. And if I can manage to say it in a way that gives them permission to disagree, that conveys that I’m kind of really trying to work with them in their inner world, that sometimes there’s this intimate moment and we go deeper and they just feel very understood and we go deeper, and it allows us to have a better chance of some positive work as we go on.

Rita: Yeah, I can see that working. And I think the other thing that’s true of your work, with kids, um, very consistently is that you make sure they understand it’s okay to disagree with you, to offer an alternative. And the nice thing about that technique is, with teens, they can hardly resist, one way or the other. They’ll either really agree with you and you’ll sort of be a guru, or they’ll really disagree with you, but it’s hard for them not to react. So, it has some engagement qualities.

John: It does often hook them.
Rita: It hooks.

John: And the other time I think it's really good to use this, but I think it can be overused, is when you're doing very brief therapy. Single session, very short-term therapy, because conceptualizing or formulating a case early helps you to work together a little more quickly.

Rita: Right, which puts a lot of pressure on you as the counselor. So this might be another time to pause the tape and think how you feel about being forced to formulate that early.

Rita: Okay, in this next session, John's working with a young man who is of both African American and Puerto Rican descent, and probably one of the more interesting things to watch is John's attempt to acknowledge the differences between them and get that to work.

John: I do think the multi-cultural dynamics are interesting here, but I have to say the part of the tape that I like the best is when I spontaneously share an image that came into my mind during the session and you can watch for that as well.

John: So, is it okay if I call you Michael?

Michael: Yeah, that's alright.

John: Okay. Um, you know we know each other a little bit, but not a lot. And, um, this is your time, you can talk about whatever you want. If there are some ways that I can be helpful to you here, or in the future, I'd like to be. But one thing that came to mind for me and I thought maybe we could start with is, you know, I was never in a gang, I'm not African American, okay? I don't know, kind of, I can try to relate to where you've been and what you've experienced, but I don't know much about it. So, I don't know if you feel comfortable telling me some stuff.

Michael: Well, it's alright?

John: Yeah, that's alright.

Michael: What?

John: It's alright.

Michael: Yeah. So, what kinds of stuff have you been through, what kinds of things have you experienced?

Michael: Oh, where do I start? Well, first of all, when I first joined the gang, you know, things didn't, you know, just all of a sudden just go wild, it kind of took awhile.
Months went past, whatever. But, you know, when that time did come, I was getting jumped and getting stabbed and shot.

John: You were kind of drifting that way, toward gang stuff?

Michael: Not really that, it’s just that, being an out of towner, nobody really knows you, and people you know, where I moved to used to just, if you didn’t look familiar, they’d wanna work ‘em, basically.

John: Okay, so you’re a new guy and they, so they use you as a target.

Michael: Not so much as a target, but you know, so much as my appearance. From the hair, to the clothes, shoes, kind of stereotyping before I even got into the gang life.

John: Okay, so you were dressing kind of, and looking kind of like maybe you were in a gang, so you got treated like it.

Michael: Yeah.

John: So then you got in, and you said that you were, I thought you said you were a Crip?

Michael: Nah.

John: No, blood?

Michael: Yeah.

John: Didn’t know which one. You’re wearing red, I should have known. So, how did that happen. How do you pick?

Michael: It wasn’t really hard for me because, you know, my mom’s side of the family they’re the Crip gangs, lots of ‘em, that’s what they do. On my dad’s side of the family, well a Latin gang called Latin Kings, you know, they’re not really Crips or Bloods, they’re just a gang.

John: Right.

Michael: But, as far as my choosing, I uh, it was the neighborhood I lived in was all Crip neighborhood, and walkin down the streets to go to play basketball, or go to school, or go to the store or somethin, you know. I, matter of fact I remember the first time I got beat up for wearing red was when, like my second month in Colorado I had a Miami Heat jersey on and got beat up and then you know, one day I just decided, well hey, I got a friend out here. He’s in the gang business. I’m tired of getting jumped, and so why not?

John: The benefits being?
Michael: The benefits being that jumping would slow down, decrease a little bit. Um, watch their back like they watch mine. Sort of like uh, brothers, you know?

John: Sure.

Michael: And speaking of my brother, uh he’s also in a gang, but different side.

John: Right. Yeah. I think I remember you saying that you and he got into a pretty serious fight with weapons.

Michael: Yeah.

John: But haven’t since.

Michael: No.

John: So, somehow got a truce going.

Michael: Not so much a truce just, you know, after that happened, it’s just like well, you know, it’s cool to fight Sam, but we’re family, ain’t got to kill Sam, my own brother, or his own brother or you know, some colors. That, when you look at it, when you really look at it, it really doesn’t mean nothin’. It’d really be a stupid reason to kill a family member, you know?

John: Yeah. So sometimes like you um, step back, somehow you manage to step back and say that’d be a stupid reason...

Michael: Nah, actually it was a kind of uh, me swinging it at him and him dodging it type of thing.

John: And then, you guys realized...

Michael: Nah, then it kind of fell out of my hand. You know, we just used our hands.

John: Okay, and after that then you decided...

Michael: Yeah, after that.

John: Let’s not use weapons with each other.

Michael: Nah. Yeah, that was the decision but you know, it didn’t really come out like that. It was just ceased and then, the other fights we got into after that incident, we never used weapons.

John: Okay. I really appreciate you know, cause I’m trying to understand, so I’ll take a guess and I’m usually wrong. So you just correct me and I appreciate that - “No, it wasn’t quite like that, it was different.” So, um we talked some about what got you into gang stuff, and what kind of got you out of it. Even though you’re not totally officially out, but out of active.
Michael: Out of activities.

John: Yeah, out of the activities and here’s what I heard. I heard you say, what kind of got you in was the neighborhood. Dressing a little bit gangstery. And I mean in some ways you could have made your recipe for what you’re doing now. It seems like the recipe for getting out of that would be getting out of the neighborhood.

Michael: Yeah, but you know.

John: Changing the way you dress.

Michael: Oh, that’s never gonna change.

John: Okay. Some things can change and some things can’t.

Michael: But as far as the neighborhood go, it’s just, it didn’t matter what neighborhood I was gonna live in, it was gonna be there, you know. Because you have so many types of hoods out there. But as far as, you know, getting myself temporarily, you know, away from all that it’s just the fact of me just getting out of the state. Going to a state where I can be focused and don’t have to worry about none of that. I know they don’t have gangs out here. You know? It’s just, yeah, it’s just basically just getting somewhere where there’s no gangs and I can be focused. I ain’t gotta worry about how much longer I’m gonna live or all this other good stuff. It’s actually pretty different.

John: So, um, you made a good pick?

Michael: Yeah.

John: You think?

Michael: Yeah.

John: So, I just had this funny image come into my mind. I’m just gonna tell you what it was.

Michael: Okay.

John: I just had this really funny thought that what if you were dressed like me.

Michael: (Laughs)

John: You can’t even imagine it, can you?

Michael: No.

John: I just thought to myself, what if we just like, switched?
Michael: Actually, you’d look pretty cool with this on.

John: I would. I would look really good with that. You’re saying you wouldn’t look so good with this?

Michael: No.

John: Have you ever dressed like this?

Michael: No.

John: How do you know you wouldn’t look cool, then?

Michael: Because that’s not my style.

John: Yeah?

Michael: Nah. It’s not my style.

John: No, and I’m not saying it should be. I just...

Michael: Yeah, I understand.

John: You can understand why I had that thought though, right?

Michael: No.

John: Cause we’re dressed really differently.

Michael: Oh yeah.

John: Well.

Michael: I see.

John: Yeah. I thought well what if, I just had this image of you dressed like me and I thought it was pretty funny.

John: So, here’s what I, here’s what I’ve learned, okay? I’ve learned that you and I, we don’t dress alike. You got a different style. I love the word you said - style. Different style. Um, and I might learn from that, okay? But, I think in some ways we think alike, okay? In that you and I can actually understand each other more kind of on that thinking level, even though we’re a lot different. And one of the things I just learned about you was that you, is that you’re a really good thinker. I mean you can kind of think your way through things, if you’re calm and cool.
Michael: Yeah.

John: Okay, and so what my message to you would be, the last thing, kind of the main thing, is you got too good a brain, your brain it too good to not use it. You know? So, you ought to use it as much as you can, whenever you can, cause it's just too good to waste. So, let's just do a couple of minutes of what we call debriefing. That's just where you tell me, what're you gonna remember of our time together. What was helpful? What did I say or do that was not so helpful?

Michael: Um, what I learned in this little session was that, you know, first don’t take, the message I got from you was don’t take stupid shit so hard. You know, like don’t stoop to nobody else’s level. You know, just basically think before I do everything. You know, think before I say something. Um, have more confidence in myself, which I believe I can do.

John: Yeah, way down deep confidence, way down deep.

Michael: Yeah.

John: Anything less helpful or you didn’t like, or you wished you hadn’t learned?

Michael: Nah.

John: Never believe you’re stupid, okay? I’m just telling you that. I’m a psychologist. I’m the boss. There’s a lot of things I don’t know, but one thing I do know is you’re not stupid.

Michael: Thank you.

John: Yeah, you’re welcome.

Rita: So, John, I know you really like that part about the shared image, but do you think there’s some risks associated with that?

John: You know, I always think there are some risks, especially if we are spontaneous and talk about something that kind of came into our mind all of a sudden. But I also think if that is tempered with what Rogers would call the right therapeutic attitude of the core conditions of unconditional positive regard, of accurate empathy, and in this case in particular, of genuineness, then that sharing of the image can be kind of a mutual experience that you can enjoy together, and again might be an intimate moment that takes the counseling a little bit deeper.

Rita: Mm hmm, yeah. I don’t think spontaneity equals authenticity, but sometimes. The other thing that I noticed in this tape that might be a great thing
for viewers to discuss is my sense that Michael is actually more connected to you on a gender level, that that overrides the fact that you are not sharing a cultural background with him. And as a female, my gut feeling was even if I were an African American Puerto Rican female, I would have a more difficult time making the connection than you did.

John: Right. This might be a situation where the gender matching is maybe more powerful or a better facilitator of counseling than racial or ethnic matching.

Rita: So, that might be something for you to pause and discuss because it’s certainly a difficult multi-cultural issue to sort out sometimes.

Rita: This next segment shows John working with a girl who describes herself, as many teenage girls do, as bitchy. You won’t see that particular description in the segment but it’s obviously an area of concern for her.

John: And I have seen her a couple of times before this taped session. And I know one of the issues for her is self-esteem, and so I work with her using a formula self-esteem activity called “What’s Good About You?” and her response I think is very interesting.

John: I’m gonna do a little game thing with you.

Krystan: ‘Kay.

John: And this is kind of silly and it’s gonna feel odd, but I’m gonna do it anyway. I’m gonna ask you the same question ten times. It’s the same question and the way the game works is that the rule is you have to give me a different answer each time. In other words, you can’t give the same answer twice.

Krystan: Okay.

John: Okay. You ready?

Krystan: Yeah.

John: So, do you wanna know the question?

Krystan: Yeah.

John: And I’m gonna write ‘em down. I’ll write down your answers. The question is, What’s good about you?

Krystan: My intelligence.

John: “My intelligence.” I almost spelled it wrong, so I guess my intelligence
isn’t very good. So, thank you. What’s good about you?

Krystan: I don’t know. I can’t think of anything. When I’m in a good mood, my attitude.

John: Okay. “When I’m in a good mood, my attitude.” Okay. Thank you. What’s good about you?

Krystan: My friendship.

John: “My friendship.” Okay. Great. Thank you. What’s good about you?

Krystan: I can’t think of anything.

John: You can use that once, cause you can’t give the same answer twice. So, I’m writing down, “I can’t think of anything.” That’s number four, so there’s six more. Ready? What’s good about you?

Krystan: I trust.

John: “I trust.” Thank you. What’s good about you?

Krystan: My ability to be a friend and, just be a friend.

John: “My ability to be a friend.” Okay, thank you. What’s good about you?

Krystan: It’s getting harder and harder. Um, I can’t think of anything. I can’t use that one.

John: Yeah, you can’t use that one again. Sometimes people feel like you’re getting to the bottom of the barrel and you can’t find anything in there. So, I’m going to give you a little more time, but if you can’t, I will fill in the rest for you. I’ll tell you good things about you.

Krystan: My love for my family could be one.

John: “My love for my family.” Great. Thank you. What’s good about you?

Krystan: That I have plans to make something of myself.

John: “Have plans to make something of myself.” Thank you. What’s good about you?

Krystan: My ideas to help my sister get through it without having to go through what I’ve gone through.

John: “My ideas to help my sister get through it without having to go through what I went through.” Okay. Thank you. What’s good about you? Last one.

Krystan: I know. Um. Maybe helping my mom out when she gets older cause she’s had it
pretty hard with two teenage daughters.

John: You guys made her age a little bit?

Krystan: Especially me. Yeah.

John: Okay, so “Helping my mom out when she gets older.” You did it! You got to ten. So, can I add a couple?

Krystan: Sure.

John: Okay. I would add, I mean just at least two more things came to mind immediately for me. One of them is your courage. Do you think of yourself as a courageous person?

Krystan: Not really.

John: I think it takes courage to do this. I think it takes courage to even come and talk to a counselor, because counselors will sometimes tell you things about yourself that don’t feel very good.

Krystan: Right.

John: They might push you to work on things. So I think it takes courage. Takes courage to be videoed. So, I’m gonna put that on the list, if that’s okay?

Krystan: Mmm hmm.

John: “Courage.” Um, your smile. You have a great smile.

Krystan: It doesn’t happen very often, cause I’m always in a bad attitude.

John: So, you agree you have a great smile?

Krystan: Yeah.

John: Yeah. You have those straight, white teeth. So I can put that down?

Krystan: Yeah.

John: Even though maybe it doesn’t happen as much as other people might like it, or you might like it to happen. Okay? Another one is your persistence. Do you think you’re a persistent person?

Krystan: I don’t know what that means.

John: I’m glad you asked. Persistence is, um, it’s when you just keep working at it. You don’t stop. Nobody’s stoppin’ you. You just keep going at it. It’s like the Energizer Bunny. You just keep goin’ and goin’. And sure, you’re tired at 4:30 in the morning, but you’re getting up and you’re making things happen.
Krystan: Yep, I would say that I’m very persistent. Cause if it wasn’t for that, I probably would have left a long time ago from this place, just because of everything that’s gone on and happened.

John: You hang in there, you know, even though you’re telling me that your boyfriend is acting like he’s right all the time, and being very difficult to deal with. And you’re hanging in there with that relationship, and you’re hanging in there with work and with everything else that’s going on. You’ve persisted and got your GED. You’re having to persist and wait to get your driver’s license from Washington.

Krystan: Yeah.

John: I guess, your birth certificate so you can get your driver’s license.

Krystan: Yeah.

John: So, all those things take a lot of persistence. So, I can put that down?

Krystan: Yep.

John: And you learned a new word.

Krystan: Yep.

John: Which, and I think this isn’t really here. You do have “my intelligence” down there, but I think that there’s a part of you that just wants to keep learning and becoming a better person.

Krystan: Definitely.

John: Yeah, so that part of you that wants to learn and become a better person. In fact, when you talked about becoming something, that nobody else in your family had really ever done anything with their lives. You want to. That drive. So, you got all these good things.

Rita: John, I really like how the “What’s good about You?” strategy works with her. She struggled a little bit. And kids do. All of us do trying to come up with those. But I think it really worked for her, and the fact that you had some positive things to add at the end helped a lot.

John: I liked the way it worked too. She took it very seriously. One thing when I’m doing that particular technique is I try to be somewhat rigid and stay with that formula of “What’s good about you?,” thank you, “What’s good about you?.” It feels a little bit artificial, um, and it also kind of forces the person to struggle. And I think the struggle is okay and being rigid is okay, as long as I’ve got some
supportive, positive statements I can make to her at the end, and build her up, and I think it went pretty well.

Rita: This next clip is actually one of my favorites. It's John working with a young man who is really eager to work and John helps him really try to take perspective. The perspective of people around him that he's struggling with.

Mike: Help me to understand teachers? I cannot do it. It's like, no matter what they say I just cannot, like, relate to what they're saying, cause they always try to be your friend, but they don't even know you yet. And they're trying to be your friend and I don't understand that.

John: Huh. So the teachers are kind of a puzzle to you.

Mike: Yeah.

John: And because they don't know you, would they still try to be your friend?

Mike: Yeah, I mean maybe it's to just try to get close to you or something. I just don't know.

John: And that confuses you?

Mike: They act way too friendly.


Mike: Yeah. It's like kind of fake, almost.

John: Okay. What would you do if you were a teacher? This is pretend, okay? I want you to imagine that you're going into a classroom. It's your job. Let's say you get 20 people, 20 students, in a classroom. How're you gonna do that?

Mike: The first day in there, let's see, I've gotta be thinking like a teacher and act like a teacher. But just because I've seen teachers act, so I'd probably more likely act like one of them and try to do what they do, but see, since that I've already felt that they do that and I feel that it's fake, I would just be myself. I don't really know.

John: Yeah. So it's a hard question to put yourself in their shoes. I hear you saying your impulse might be to be like them, which you've criticized as being fake, but then you think maybe “I'll just be myself.”

Mike: Maybe that's what they're doing and I don't realize that.
John: Do they just seem like they’re being fake? So, is that possible?

Mike: It could be.

John: Or maybe, here’s something I might do. If I was a teacher and I’m going into a classroom where I don’t know people, I might try too hard, you know? I might say, “Hey, Michael, how’s it going?” I might try to chum up to you because I want you to like me. I want you to learn from me.

Mike: I see what you’re saying.

John: I might try too hard so that it even comes across as phony, but it’s not so much phony as it is trying too hard. You know? Wanting you to like me.

Mike: Teachers want that so their class goes better for you and them. Huh?

John: So that makes some sense then? I’m just trying to think if I was in a teacher’s shoes, what would I wanna do. What I’m hearing from you is it’s a struggle for you to figure teachers out and sometimes you don’t trust people very well, but you’re working on it. And that you are, from our little discussion, if you just sit and think about it and try to put yourself in the teacher’s shoes, or in a friend’s shoes, that you’re pretty smart and you can kind of figure out quite a bit of what’s going on. What do you think? Do you think that’s true?

Mike: Yeah, it seems true. In my mind it seems true.

John: I’m thinking, even if somebody...let’s just say, I meet you, I get to know you, I act like I’m your friend, and then I say some nasty things behind your back, that aren’t even true. You look uncomfortable, even when I pretend that. Um, I’ll bet you could even figure out what that’s about. If you put yourself in my shoes, okay? I get to know you a little bit, and then I start saying nasty things about you. What do you think that’s about?

Mike: I don’t know. Maybe it’s cause you think that I’m being fake.

John: Maybe I would be not liking something about you and thinking you’re phony or fake.

Mike: The attitude, but I don’t really....I don’t know why you would start off nice like that and then just all of a sudden turn around like that all of a sudden. I don’t know.

John: Why do you think...you’ve watched some television, you, you’ve told me you know how anger and aggression could lead to bad things. Try to think like, I want you to try to think like a psychologist, okay? I want you to think, like, get in the person’s head. Why would somebody be nice to somebody at first, and then betray them? What makes people act like that?

Mike: I don’t know. Just to use them. I have no clue.
John: No clue. Have you ever done it?

Mike: Yeah, actually it would be cause of using. It was because they wanted something from that person at that time and after they got that, they're done with it, they don't need you no more so they push you away. Yeah, I've done that.

John: So you've actually done that.

Mike: Yes.

John: Okay, so you can see how that works. You can kind of think about have I ever done that? I want you to think with me on this. Now sometimes people push people away because they don't feel like they're good enough. Maybe I get to know you and I think, oh he seems like a nice guy. I'm not good enough to be his friend, I better treat him like crap.

Mike: I've done that too.

John: Oh, you have?

Mike: I've done that too. I have this friend up here, Stevo, and he seems like way too, he's like way nice, he has this perfect good, do-good attitude, and I like started pushing him away because I was nothing like that. I didn't think he wanted to hang out with me at all. I thought he was doing it just to be nice to me.

John: Uh huh.

Mike: So I started pushing him away. I know exactly what you mean now.

John: Okay. So, what I'm trying to do is to say that you're a pretty smart guy. So one of the things that you could do, that you're not doing a lot right now of, well, why do people act the way they do. Maybe they feel they're not good enough. Maybe they're just using somebody. Maybe the teachers are just trying too hard. You know? And so you come up with these ideas about why people might be doing the things they're doing. They might be the right explanation. You might be wrong. But what it does is it gives you more understanding of what might be happening.

Mike: It does.

John: Most people, just like you, like you're telling me you keep people at a distance. And you do that because people have betrayed you.

Mike: Right.

John: Most people are the way they are for some reason. So, if you can kind of try to figure it out, sometimes it's helpful.
Mike: I never even thought about that before.
John: Okay.
Mike: That’s gonna open my eyes up a little more now, now that you say that.
John: Yeah. Try to put yourself in other people's shoes, and in their mind.

Rita: Now we’re down to the final clip. This last session is John working with an African American young woman, who he has seen a couple of other times. Even in the brief clip that we’re going to watch you’ll notice how camera conscious she is, but it’s definitely a clip that shows some interesting dynamics.

John: I should also mention that this is a girl who, the issue that we’re working on, I’ve seen her before and the issue we’re working on is how she intimidates other people socially. She’s tall, she’s attractive, she’s intelligent. She’s got this kind of powerful imposing personality, so she sometimes scares people. What we work on, what we end up working on, after we’ve done “What’s good about you?” which isn’t shown in the clip, we somehow get into a discussion of how she has trouble expressing her affection and her love for people who she cares about, and to anyone. And so we finally work on some homework on the issue of giving compliments. It’s an interesting dynamic.

Rita: You might watch for that muscle metaphor, too, and see how that works for you.

John: ....attitude, see. “I’ll just go put a hood over my head and it doesn’t matter.” See, you’re just kind of giving people the message that you don’t really matter that much to me. You don’t really matter that much to me.

Andrea: Okay. I see now. At first I didn’t, but yeah.
John: Okay, so how could you give people the message that they actually matter to you, that you give a shit?

Andrea: Sit there with my legs crossed and .... (gesture of a head nod)
John: Act like it.
Andrea: Act like it. No, just care a little more.
John: I think you do care some, right?
Andrea: I do, it's just if I'm not feeling something, I'm not feeling it, you know?
John: You got, okay, I’m gonna use this athletic metaphor that I use a lot. Okay, you got muscles, right? Are you right handed or left handed?

Andrea: Right handed.

John: Which muscle’s bigger, your right hand or your left hand?

Andrea: My right.

John: Because?

Andrea: Jack off. No....(laughs), because I use this one the most?

John: Yeah, you use that one the most so it gets to be the biggest muscle. It’s stronger. Okay? You got a “I don’t give a shit, strong, I don’t give a shit muscle”, okay? Because you’ve worked it, cause you don’t want people to get to you. Cause you said, and this is one of your big problems, cause you don’t take no stuff. And I know you meant shit. So you’ve worked that muscle. Boom! It’s buff. It’s out there.

Andrea: It’s nasty.

John: Now, you’ve got another muscle.

Andrea: My left arm?

John: Yeah, that maybe isn’t quite as strong, cause you haven’t practiced it so much. This is the “I don’t give a shit muscle.” It’s pretty darn developed. This is the “I care about you” muscle, communicated to other people. You don’t use that one very often.

Andrea: Yeah.

John: Does it cause any...this is a personal question, you don’t have to answer it. Does it cause any problems in your relationship?

Andrea: See, now, I don't know what you're saying because you're speaking in metaphors. If you just tell me what you're saying.

John: The fact that you don’t say “I love you,” “I care about you.” You don’t initiate that kind of a conversation. You don’t say, you know, “You really mean a lot to me. Thank you for being in my life.” The fact that you don’t say those kinds of things, does that present itself as a problem for somebody who you're in a romantic relationship with? Does the person say, “Hey, why don’t you ever tell me you care about me?”

Andrea: I don’t know, I try to, but then I just feel all weird.

John: Yeah, okay.
Andrea: So I just stop, before anything gets said, before I say anything.

John: You even stop before you say something?

Andrea: I’m like, “ch--”

John: Never mind.

Andrea: “Never mind.” No, I don’t know, probably. Most likely.

John: So, just my suggestion for you, okay? Is that you are a smart, talented, person who’s clever with an excellent sense of humor. You’ve got so many good qualities I can’t list them all, okay? But one thing to work on, one homework assignment I’m giving you, something to practice over and over again, is to say to people who you care about, “I care about you, thank you for being a friend,” giving them compliments.

Andrea: I was going to do that at graduation.

John: Okay, you would wait till then, huh?

Andrea: Yeah.

John: That’s in August, whenever.

Andrea: That’s it, don’t expect again.

John: It’s kind of a once in a lifetime thing.

Andrea: Yeah, pretty much.

John: But you see how weak that muscle must be.

Andrea: It’d be all right. Instead of doing...

John: You might as well just cut it off, you’re not even using it.

Andrea: I do sometimes, just, I don’t know, just to my family, not really people outside.

John: You see what I’m saying, though? Something to think about, just something to think about. You know, if you wanted to make that a little stronger, what would happen. I think it’d be a really interesting experiment. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You told me, “I’m willing to try everything at least once.”

Andrea: I tried it. I just felt corny. And then I expect it back three or four or five or six days later and I don’t get it back, so it’s like ....

John: It’s not happening again.
Andrea: Yeah, don’t expect a rose.

John: Alright, so, I’ve said a lot of nice things to you today. I’m ready.

Andrea: (Laughs)

John: No, just for you to say some kind of compliment back. I’m waiting, just like you.

Andrea: Uh, what do I say to you? I don’t know.

John: Let me rephrase it, make it easier. I wanted to ask you at the end, what was helpful or interesting, anything that you enjoyed about our time together?

Andrea: That we just talked, you know.

John: You enjoyed talking.

Andrea: Everybody does, you know. I’m pretty sure, I hope they do.

John: See, you’re doing it right now. See what you’re doing? You’re putting your head under your hood and you’re saying “anybody would enjoy this, this is not special.” You see?

Andrea: Okay, you’re right, you’re right. Um, I really enjoyed it, you know. I got to talk.

John: What’d you enjoy?

Andrea: Um, what did I enjoy? I’m in a video. That’s cool. Once in a lifetime thing.

John: Anybody would enjoy that.

Andrea: Not anybody, you know, depends on who the person was. I would say that.

John: Okay, so is there something kind of, for you, that feels a little bit special about being picked to be in a video? Getting this chance.

Andrea: Like, my problems seem interesting. I don’t know. Why would I choose somebody because of that, they make the video better, you know, than just someone I would just go pick off who’s classified themselves as perfect, you know?

John: So, you’re assignment, okay? You can accept it if you want to. It’s like Mission Impossible. If you choose to accept it is, to go around and compliment people over and over again, with no thought about whether or not it’s gonna come back to you.

Andrea: Okay. I’ll try that.
John: At least once.

Andrea: A few times, different people.

John: Yeah, give it a shot, see what happens.

Andrea: One per person.

Rita: So, John, as I watched this clip, I was struck by how resistant this particular young woman can be, and it kind of shows in her bearing and yet, you get her to agree to try to give some compliments, not necessarily to you.

John: And what’s interesting to me is, I know she wasn’t very rewarding or positive back to me, but I still really enjoyed working with her. So what I find is even though working with challenging youth can not be very rewarding directly, that there’s something about it that I can really appreciate it and deeply enjoy.

Rita: And we both believe that’s essential. The relationship with the young person is what has to underlie all of the techniques and strategies that you might use for engagement or intervention or assessment, and if the relationship isn’t there, the rest of it really doesn’t matter. So, the thing that’s important is to assess if you can work with kids and if you like working with kids. Because if you don’t, they will sense it. They understand that.

John: And if they sense it and understand that, they just might make your therapeutic life a little miserable.

Rita: Or quite miserable.

John: Or quite miserable and I’ve certainly had that experience sometimes. But I also have to say, that maybe it’s my own attitude, but even when young people are very difficult and make my life a little bit miserable, there’s still something that’s kind of enjoyable or even fun about the interaction.

Rita: Right, and I’ve always thought that might be the kid in you, but we hope you’ve had some fun watching these videotapes and the clips that the kids offered, and we also wish you the very best in working with tough kids.
Part Four: References and Resources


Other Relevant Works by the Authors


