

This article reflects the first of a series entitled “How to Maintain a Therapeutic Relationship when your Buttons are being Pushed – 21 Lessons for Supporting Individuals with Disabilities.” They have been found to provide useful skills for developing and maintaining a therapeutic relationship with anyone. This article will be focusing on the first six lessons.

Supporting Persons with Disabilities (Lessons 1 - 6)



1 Understanding the whole person:

We can sometimes spend too much time focused on a person's diagnosis, which, in reality, accounts for a small part of someone's true identity. No one wants to be referred to as a collection of symptoms but, instead, as a unique individual possessing their own strengths and challenges. One strategy is to begin with “people first” phrases like “this is a person who wants to be successful” rather than phrases like “this is a non-compliant patient with an intellectual problem.”

2 Understand the behavior; don't label it. What are they trying to tell you?

All behavior is purposeful and goal-directed, has meaning, and is a form of communication. What is the person trying to tell us? As support providers, part of our job is to understand the behavior and, if it is challenging, then our role is to help the person find ways to express themselves in a constructive manner. Labels are like check marks on a to-do list. They indicate an ending rather than a beginning, and conclusions rather than possibilities.

3 Understand non-compliance before trying to overcome it:

Often, the knee jerk reaction to someone's non-compliance is to assume the person does not want to improve. There was once an individual who refused to bathe regularly. Staff concluded that he just didn't care or actually liked offending others by his poor hygiene. When asked, however, he said he was afraid of getting electrocuted when he was in the shower! **Rule of thumb:** seek to understand behavior before trying to change it.



4 Understand how an emotion, thought and behavior differ:

We often use “I feel” to convey the idea of a thought. That can sometimes derail productive dialogue. Couples therapists teach patients phrases such as “I feel sad when you forget to take out the trash” rather than “I feel you don't care about me when you don't take out the trash”. The former invites the listener to offer support and understanding. The latter invites defensiveness and resistance to change. A common phrase in pop psychology is “follow your gut”. It would be better to remind ourselves, and those we support, to “understand your gut before acting”. Our gut is a barometer to our past experiences. It signals us to avoid harmful situations and pursue pleasurable situations.

5 The starting point for resolving DSP-participant conflict is the staff:

One of the strengths of a good direct support provider is the ability to suspend one's own needs (when your gut may be telling you just the opposite) and serve the needs of others. One example may be when an individual's offensive behavior “pushes our buttons” and distract us from doing our job as direct support providers. Our behavior should be guided by these two questions: What are the needs of this individual, and how can I best meet those needs?

6 Be careful how we measure success for those we serve, & ourselves:

What may have been easy for an individual to accomplish on Monday may be impossible on Tuesday. Our job is to engage with our people and gauge what is possible today. It is our job to figure this out with our individuals every day and then do our best to support and assist them.

