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## A QUESTION OF SUCCESS

"What hurts?" are the words that an influential therapist and writer, Irving Yalom, used to start his sessions. In my experience, when I meet with clients for the first time, their implicit requests are the same: "Can you relieve my pain?" With kids and adolescents, there is a wish for the family to be relieved of the worry about their child.

Ironically, the path of living involves both successes and setbacks, positive and negative emotions. A request to be pain-free can never be fulfilled completely. And, the challenge of successful therapy invariably requires the re-working of such initial goals.

Hence, a question: how can a person rate himself as "a success," either as a client or a therapist?

## THE GUAGE OF SUCCESS: TOWARD OR AWAY

I believe that, to feel successful, a person is required to accomplish a two-step internal process: first, create a personally meaningful life vision; then, create an internal measuring system which allows to rate daily events against that vision. In ACT (Acceptance Commitment Therapy) one of the cognitive interventions involves teaching a client to rate daily events as "toward" the fulfillment of personal values, or "away" from such values. As with most cognitive techniques, this approach tends to instill a sense of self-control, increase motivation and decrease self-doubt.

In the course of my career, I have spent time practicing in the Financial District, downtown Boston. Quite often, my clients were in their twenties, employed in wealth management and earning six-figure salaries. And, just as often, a question, "What does money mean to you?" evoked much emotion. I heard stories of shame growing up, feeling that their families were deprived of power or influence due to low earnings. These clients felt that their advancement along the corporate ladder was a move "toward" a life of meaning and self-esteem. Ability to fully acknowledge the emotional significance of their career development allowed them to approach their life choices with grater sense of balance and self-acceptance.

In contact, I had opportunities to work with their older peers who have achieved financial success and, at times, accumulated personal wealth in seven or eight-digit range. For some of these advanced professionals, money assumed a radically different meaning. It represented the stress of on-going competition, time away from the family or inability to pursue personal interests beyond work. Their relief came, at times, from a decision to pursue activities beyond financial gains.

## SUCCESS AND ADHD

Working with kids or adults with ADHD, I often find them struggling with their view of themselves as successful. Indeed, this is one of the hallmark questions in an ADHD diagnostic interview: "How often did teachers say that you performed below your potential?" Early negative feedback from the school system, often conveyed in the form of grades, may become internalized and take shape of low self-esteem. Such issues may persist through lifetime, with

people in their sixties responding to current life events as if they were still hearing the voices of their elementary school teachers.

Moreover, ADHD is often accompanied by another cognitive difficulty: executive functioning deficit. A common-sense definition of executive functioning was given to me by a psychiatrist-colleague, who described it as ability to "see the forest for the trees." I believe, he meant that executive functioning involves capacity to review multitude of details and recognize a unifying pattern. And, the inverse is true: capacity for executive functioning allows to start with a single goal, generate a series of tasks and proceed to their logical completion.

As an example, executive functioning would allow a person to proceed from the idea of "hosting a party" toward concrete decisions on time, space and budget to, finally, the details of guests, invitations, recipes and shopping. Inversely, capacity for executive functioning would allow a catering manager to walk into a busy kitchen and assess whether party preparations are proceeding on track, and whether the general busyness is organized enough to fit the demands of time, space and budget.



For kids, executive functioning is primarily challenged by school system. Quite often, ADHD kids are capable of comprehending school material, but they may finish their work late or, else, forget to turn in their assignments. As in prior examples, executive functioning deficit affects the ability to translate the goal of "homework completion" into a sequence of concrete tasks that would, eventually, result in the teacher's possession of a finished worksheet. And, inversely, when the kid is faced with a variety of choices of activities to pursue after school, executive functioning would affect ability to make the choices leading to the overarching goal of positive school performance.

#### RE-TRAINING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

In my opinion, cognitive skills that contribute to executive functioning are often effectively taught by disciplines outside of psychology. For adults, programs in software design and project management programs drill "up-down" or "bottom-up" approaches to organizing thoughts. Similarly, business schools specialize in indoctrinating skills for identifying concrete achievable

goals when faced with ambiguous problem situations. Often, I refer adults to such sources as Steven Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." Or, Ari Tuckman's "Understand Your Brain, Get More Done: Executive Functions Workbook."

For kids, occupational therapists and special educators excel at teaching skills for organizing school work. An executive skills coach may work outside of the bounds of a 45-minute clinical hour and, for example, visit a child's home, make specific suggestions for after-school routine or even assist in the physical arrangement of a home office.

As with many basic tenants of psychotherapy, the principles for improving executive functioning are easy to grasp. However, the art of therapy involves translating such skills into daily behavior. Often, the initial impulse toward inattention occurs beyond conscious control. Therefore, studying workbooks in a tranquil environment is only partially effective in influencing behavior that occurs in emotional or fast-paced situations.

In my practice, I assign daily exercises aimed at developing alternative habits. I teach mindfulness techniques that, in themselves, have been proven by scholarly research to improve attention skills. When working with ADHD clients, I specifically direct mindfulness practice at the recognition of impulsivity. And, I suggest applying these skills to build increasing awareness of the earliest physical, somatic signs that may predict transition away from goal-directed organized behavior. The practice involves introducing such skills into daily routine, often integrating mindfulness, stress management, self-care and organizational tools.

#### TOWARD PERSONAL DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

I fully believe that personal well-being increases with active commitment toward clearly defined and meaningful values. It is a fundamental philosophical assumption that is responsible for principle placement of "commitment" within the acronym of ACT. Therefore, successful therapy establishes an effective relationship that facilitates the definition of such values, for example, social engagement, nurturance, financial stability or intellectual growth. Successful therapy also assists with developing skills in acting according to such values. For ADHD clients, this process involves developing greater capacity for recognizing and containing impulsivity and, often, re-training executive functioning skills. With practice, such new skills become new habitual behaviors which support the translation of individual values into daily life.