

Psychotherapy Guidebook

SAY IT AGAIN

An Active Therapy Technique

Ben C. Finney

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Say It Again — An Active Therapy Technique

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DEFINITION

Say It Again is an active technique for releasing feelings, bringing out insight, and changing behavior. It uses repeating, in which the client is asked to repeat each sentence several times before going on to the next sentence; prompting, in which the therapist, like the stage prompter, provides lines for the client to say; and directions where the therapist, like the drama director, directs the client how to act and express his feelings.

HISTORY

I (Ben C. Finney) developed Say It Again gradually in a trial-and-error way. I found that it elicited intense emotional catharsis, and that the abreaction (reliving) of traumatic experiences, especially early childhood experiences, produced insight, behavior changes, and reduction of personal discomfort. Other therapists have used it and they too have found it productive. It can be employed easily and then stopped without disruption when another method seems preferable.

TECHNIQUE

- 1. Repeating.** In repeating, the client is instructed to repeat each sentence he says several times before going on to the next phrase, letting it “echo” and recruit feelings and associations until a new sentence comes to mind. He is also asked to repeat this new sentence several times before saying the next one, which is repeated in turn. He is encouraged to “listen” to what he is saying and to try to feel the emotional impact rather than to think about what he is going to say next. When he stops talking because he is blocked or trying to sort out what he is thinking, he is urged to keep on repeating the last sentence until a new one emerges.
- 2. Repeating a sentence over and over has several important effects.** Forcing such a novel mode of expression disrupts the familiar thought patterns and encourages new ways of thinking. Second, it is difficult to repeat long and complex sentences, and of necessity phrases are short, direct, and childlike, and the usual defenses against feelings of intellectual abstractions are blocked. When a phrase contains emotions, repetition allows the person’s feelings to be recruited and amplified, rather than avoided by his jumping to a new topic.
- 3. Preserving emotional momentum is important.** Insisting that the person keep talking — repeating the last phrase he said if nothing comes to mind — helps keep up the momentum. Another way to keep one momentum going is for the therapist to repeat over and over the last phrase the client

said before he stopped. If the client is right on the edge of strong feelings, this will push them over into discharge. The therapist can also amplify the feelings that have been expressed by the client by repeating the feelings with more intense emotional expression. By using the voice and expression to intensify feelings, the therapist can draw out more emotion from the client.

4. Prompting. In prompting, the client is offered a phrase to say that is not one he has previously said, but one close enough to what he is ready to express that he could accept it as his feeling. He is asked to repeat it at least once to see if it feels correct. If the phrase does not express the client's thought or feeling correctly, he should then change it so that it does. It is similar to an interpretation, in that the therapist is directing the client's attention to some feeling that he has not been immediately aware of; it differs in that prompting can be used repeatedly to push the client with frequent small nudges, whereas interpretations are used less frequently and usually involve larger steps.

5. Directions. In directions, the therapist acts like a director who tells the actor not only what to say, but how to say it and how to move and gesture. As director, the therapist can tell the client to act or talk more assertively, to clench his fist, pound a pillow, or to shake with fear. These physical actions often help intensify a feeling or to make it more real.

The following is a typescript of part of a session illustrating these techniques. The client has connected with the "child" in herself and is talking

to her “father”.

Client: You don't show your love to me. You don't show your love to me. You don't show it.[repeat]

Therapist: Louder! “You don't show your love to me.” Say it louder. [a direction]

Client: You don't show it! You don't show it. You show it to that baby [a shift, introducing the baby]

Therapist: “You show it to that baby and not to me!” Say that! [This prompt involved a very small step; the “You don't show it” and “You show it to that baby” are combined.]

Client: You show it to that baby and not to me! You show it to that baby and not to me!!! [increasing anger] IT'S ALL GONE!!

Therapist: Pound the pillow! [a direction] Say, “ You took your love away and gave it to that baby! Say that!; [This prompt amplified the feeling “It's all gone” and “You show it to that baby.”]

Client: You took your love away and gave it to that baby. You took your love away and gave it to that baby!

Therapist: Say, “You took your love away and gave it to that baby and it hurts! Say it loud!! [a prompt, putting the pain in her expression into words, and a direction to say it loudly with feeling]

Client: YES! IT HURTS!! YOU TOOK YOUR LOVE AWAY AND GAVE IT TO THAT BABY AND IT HURTS! [The client begins crying.]

APPLICATIONS

Say It Again can be introduced when the client needs to get to feelings,

or it can be used on a regular basis. Most clients accept it comfortably, but some are threatened and it is not used. Except for an occasional client who complained that the strong feeling kept on reverberating after the session and threatened to get out of control, I have not had adverse reactions to the technique. While my experience has been limited to adult maladjustment problems and neurotic conflicts, other therapists have reported good results with schizophrenic clients.

It can be used in couple therapy, in which the two talk directly to each other, but in the Say It Again structure the therapist controls the interaction. It seems to slow the interaction down so that each can hear what the other is saying.

In groups, one style is to put a member on Say It Again structure for a dozen phrases and then to stop and let another member react and say how they are feeling. The new member is kept on Say It Again for a bit and then it is shifted to another member. With the use of directions and prompts an interaction can often be made to be more feeling and productive.

Another style is to take a volunteer and have him lie down, with the group sitting close and touching him. The person is kept on Say It Again until some abreaction develops. When a suitable place to stop is arrived at, then the other members are encouraged to express the feelings they had as they

listened. Usually one member seems to have strong feelings, and he in turn is focused on with the Say It Again structure.