

The Option Method Institute

Education based on the teachings of Bruce Di Marsico

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The Practice of the Option Method

From

Monday Night Study Group, 1973

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Tonight I'll say some things about the actual practice and the actual use of the method, step-by-step and in terms of the "do's" and "don'ts" of working with a patient.

The way to help people to be happy in the purest form would be to strictly ask questions while making very few, if any, statements. The reason for that is: you're not going to tell someone *what* they should be feeling, or *how* they should be feeling, or that they shouldn't be feeling the way they are.

So one of the "do's" is: you do ask questions about how a person is feeling. And one of the "don'ts" is: you don't suggest how they should feel.

Although the question itself may suggest how they *could* feel, you never suggest how they should feel. You never imply that they shouldn't feel bad, and you place no "should's" on them and no "should not's" on them.

You help them to see what reasons they have for feeling bad. You are not trying to help them to see that they have *no* reason for feeling bad. It's an important difference. To do so is a judgment. To do so is to assert that they shouldn't feel bad. Just that orientation will make a whole difference in your tone of voice, in your perception, in your attitude, in your questions, in their answers, and in their response to you. Even so, they will most likely lay it on themselves anyway that they should not be unhappy, or that they should be happy.

The line of questioning can be formalized, and the actual session in its simplest form would sound something like this:

The person would tell you something. They would tell you anything,

First, you decide whether what they've told you or not is something that they're unhappy about. If not, you ask them what they're unhappy about, approximating whatever language they use.

So with one person you might say, “What’s bugging you?” With another person you might say, “What’s bothering you?” or, “What is there that you’re feeling bad about?” or, “Why are you sad?” And you go with their language.

You pick up on their vocabulary. If they say “I’m bothered by this. I’m bothered by that”, their word is “bother”, so use that. If they say, “I’m uncomfortable about this,” their word is “uncomfortable”, and so on.

The reason we don’t use other words is two-fold. First, they will very frequently have a different meaning for another word, and second, they will think that your use of another word is some kind of a judgment on the word that they were using, and that you perhaps have a reluctance to use the word that they were using. You might very well be reluctant, if you’re avoiding their words and using your own.

The model word I’m going to use here is “unhappy”, but that’s in quotes because that’s only the model word. Substitute any other word for that.

So you’ve asked “What are you unhappy about?” and they’ve answered. The next question to ask is, “Why are you unhappy about that?”

The second question is also a model question. Some other forms it could take: “For what reason does that bother you?” Or, “What is there about that?” The first few times you ask, they’re going to give you a belief, a further explanation of *what* they’re unhappy about.

Imagine a situation where a young person says, “I’m really feeling bad.” And you ask, “What are you feeling bad about?” or “Why are you feeling bad?” He responds, “Because my parents are so strict.” You ask, “Why do you feel bad because your parents are so strict?” He responds, “Because they won’t let me stay up to see the late show.” He’s further explaining what particular thing he’s unhappy about, not why, yet.

You ask, “Why are you unhappy that they won’t let you stay up to see the late show? Why do you feel bad about that?” He responds, “Because if I can’t stay up and see the late show I feel bad because all my friends are going to be staying up to see it.” You ask, “Why would you be unhappy if you didn’t get to see the late show, and all your friends got to see it?” He responds, “Because the next day they’re all going to be talking about what they saw on that movie and I’m not going to know what to say.” You ask, “Why would that make you feel unhappy?” He responds, “Well, because then I feel stupid.”

So you started off with him saying, “I’m unhappy because my parents are strict.” But what he’s really unhappy about, or why he’s really unhappy that his parents are strict, is because their strictness makes him feel stupid, and you only get to that by asking, “Why?”

“So I’m unhappy that I feel stupid.” Now this is a point at which many of you run into a problem. Do you ask the person why they’re unhappy if they feel stupid, or why do they feel stupid? The reason there is a question is because you don’t know what he means by “stupid.”

So you clarify by simply asking, “What do you mean by stupid?” “Stupid” could simply mean “I feel bad”. It could mean that, “My friends think that I am ignorant because I can’t talk about the late show, and that I don’t really want to tell them that my parents won’t let me stay up, because then they’ll think that I’m a baby,” or almost anything.

So you have to find out what “stupid” means. And then the session could go in the direction of peer group approval and concern about whether people are going to like him or not, and what that means, or it could go in the direction of his own relationship with his parents, or his relationship with his friends or, in fact, even how he feels about himself.

You may be feeling that he has no reason to feel stupid, but you don’t know what he means by “stupid”, and so the best thing to do is to find out.

Many words that people will use (they get good at it) are just other words for being unhappy, like stupid.

“I feel dumb. I feel silly. I feel foolish. I feel stupid.” But all these words could also be practical descriptions: “I actually do have difficulty thinking, and I feel like I can’t learn anything and I feel like I don’t know anything.” And the next question might be, “Why do you believe you should know something?”, or perhaps “Why would you be unhappy that you don’t know?”

So the practical, strictly simple way of using Option is to continuously ask why, or what “why” really stands for – “for what reason”. You can ask in any way. You can say, “What is there about it that you’re unhappy about?” or “For what reason does that bother you?” or “Why does that bother you?”

Your questions needn’t be strict and rigid, but in a sense it’s always the same question and that’s very formal. And when you ask the question, the person will come up with some answer. So in terms of the “do’s” and “don’ts”, you don’t say anything. You only ask why.

Sometimes you will find yourself talking in order to clarify: “Well, is this what you mean?” or, “Is that what you mean?” or, “If I get you right this is what you’re saying”; you’re trying to sum up and to clarify further. So in so far as there are statements, they may be like: “Is this where it’s at? Is this what you’re saying and why are you saying that?”

Now the question, “Why do you believe that?” There are very clear times when that is never to be used, and there are very clear times when it is to be used. You never use it when there’s a matter of fact involved. If a person believes that taller people die sooner than shorter people, it isn’t going to really matter whether that’s true or it’s not true. What you’re concerned with, is why they’d be unhappy about it if it were true.

You'll find that if you get into why they'll be unhappy about it, if it were true, they may very well come to why they believe that's true. But your position is not to challenge, "Why do you believe that's so?" The question, "Why do you believe" is "Why do you believe you'd have to be unhappy? Why do you believe that that is something to be unhappy about?"

You use, "Why do you believe?" not when there's a question of fact, but when there's an emotional contradiction. An emotional contradiction is such things as depressions. You will use, "Why do you believe?" quite a bit perhaps when you're really in a clear case of depression.

For example, a person says, "I blush because I'm afraid of these people." You ask them, "Why are you afraid?" and they keep saying they don't know. The question that's called for is, "Why do you believe that you blush because you're afraid? Why did you make that deduction that the reason you blush is because you're afraid, when you say you don't know why you're afraid?"

The patient who says, "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know." may seem to have the perfect system to beat you at your game. That's not so. Because when the patient says to me, "I don't know why I'm unhappy about that." I ask them, "Why, then, do you believe you are unhappy?"

They may say, "Because I feel unhappy." I ask, "And why do you feel unhappy?" They say, "I don't know." I ask, "Then how do you know that what you're feeling is unhappy?" So that's why we use the question, "Why do you believe?" or "How do you know?" or "What makes you think?" These questions are used only when you have a contradiction.

When are contradictions an option? A contradiction is a person saying, "I'm unhappy," which means, "I have a reason to be unhappy," and then saying, "But I don't have a reason to be." So that anything in the form of: "I'm unhappy, but I don't know my reason," is a very clear contradiction. You question the belief of why they believe that that contradiction is even possible.

You'll find the person is going to have to say something like, "What I'm unhappy about is I'm afraid I'm going to be unhappy" or that, "I'm afraid I'm unhappy."

And so we find that the person that says, "I don't know" all the time is depressed, that's why they say, "I'm unhappy and I don't know why." It's because they're afraid that they are unhappy, and they look for every reason in the book, and they quickly sort through them all in their heads, and they know that none of them are really reasons.

They don't trust any of those answers. They have 50 things to choose from, 50 reasons, but they know that's not what is really bothering them. What's really bothering them is that they're afraid they're going to be unhappy.

Again, the "do's" and "don'ts". You do ask a person why they believe what they believe, when they are involved in an emotional contradiction. You don't ask a person why they believe what they believe when they're involved with a disputed fact, something that you think you disagree with.

By observing that guideline, I have found out some very amazing things from my patients. When I didn't challenge or question why a person believes such-and-such a thing, we really got into some real things about why they were feeling the way they were, that showed me that what I had believed was a fact wasn't indeed a fact.

You can let them tell you more about where they're at: "Why do you believe that when such-and-such a thing happens to you, another thing can happen? How could that be?" Sometimes this can be heard as a challenge, as if you asked "Why do you believe you're breathing?" Frequently the kind of answer you'll get is, "Why are you asking me that?" And you'll find that you won't have a good reason for asking that. If they believe that Paris is the capital of Russia, who cares? You want to know why they are unhappy.

A lot of people have dire predictions, and if their predictions are from unhappiness, you'll be dealing with the unhappiness; and if their predictions are just because they're in the know and you're not that's your problem, not theirs.

To reiterate, some of the basic questions are, "Why?" or "For what reason?", and then you clarify, "Do you mean this or do you mean that?" and from time-to-time, "Why do you believe that?"

By and large, when they're just talking about how they feel such-and-such a way, they will respond with, "Because. . ." When you get a contradiction you ask them why they believe that contradiction is possible. How do they know this? You'll find that they may answer that they're deducing it by certain signs, or they may tell you how they know. If they tell you how they know, then you have something to ask them.

Here are some examples of emotional contradictions: "I feel such-and-such and I don't know why", "other people make me unhappy", "If it was okay for me not to have it, then I wouldn't want it." You ask, "Why do you believe that?"

An easy guideline to follow could be, when it would seem absurd to ask, "Why would you be unhappy about that?" then you ask, "Why do you believe that?"

There's another question that becomes very important. When you've traced down the beliefs, and the person says, "I'm unhappy for this reason, that reason, the other reason" and you ask, "Well, why would you be unhappy if that happened?" and they say, "I don't know." What they are really saying is "I can't think of a reason but I still would be unhappy, I don't know why." The question that you ask at that point is, "Well, what are you afraid would happen if you weren't unhappy?" because the unhappiness has got its own reason, which is motivation.

When there is no other reason for being unhappy (and there is always a point at which there's no other reason to be unhappy), and you've gone through every reason they could have to be

unhappy and then there finally is no other reason for being unhappy, the reason for being unhappy then is as motivation. “Because if I wasn’t unhappy I wouldn’t get what I wanted.” “I wouldn’t want it.” “I wouldn’t care.” Care becomes a very frequently used word at that point. It would mean, if I wasn’t unhappy, it would mean I didn’t care about my happiness.

“Why do you believe that if you didn’t need it anymore you wouldn’t want it?” is basically a way of saying, “Why do you believe if it didn’t make you unhappy not to have it, you still couldn’t want it?”

They start with, “I’m unhappy with my spouse. She’s always _____” and you work all the way down to, “If I wasn’t unhappy with her that would be the same as saying I didn’t want her to be happy, I didn’t want her to change. I didn’t want her to be happier.”

I might ask, “Why do you believe that if you weren’t unhappy with the way she was that it would mean that you didn’t want her to be different with all your heart?” And then you get into the question of how we use depression as a way of motivating ourselves. “Why would you believe that you wouldn’t want what you wanted if you no longer feared not having it?”

When someone says, “Because of who I am, people get unhappy with me.” “I make so-and-so unhappy. I make this one unhappy.” a question I ask at that time is, “Do they have to be unhappy with you?” Which is the same question as, “Why do you believe that they would have to be unhappy with you?” That flips it back to them and they would tell you why they believe they would have to be unhappy with somebody like them. So when people are talking about making other people unhappy, they often feel bad because they believe that they made somebody *else* unhappy.

If I really believe I’ve made someone unhappy, I have to feel bad because I am believing that they have reasons to be unhappy with what I’ve done, and that there are reasons to be unhappy.

If I believe that there are reasons to be unhappy with something, I'm unhappy about it. So the question I often would ask deals with the emotional contradiction that I could make someone unhappy. That basic myth (if you want to call it that rather than "an emotional contradiction") is, "Why do you believe that they would have to be unhappy if you did that?"

I ask such things as, "Why would anyone have to be unhappy with you? Would anyone have to be unhappy with you?" Most everyone I've ever asked has said, "No, no one has to be unhappy with me." That's why I say things, like, "If people loved you, would they be unhappy with you if you did something like that? If someone loved you couldn't they understand? Would they have to be unhappy?"

Almost invariably, people I've asked have said, "No, of course not." If I ask "Why would they be unhappy about that quality in you?" the answer very frequently is, "Because I would be" and then I ask "Why would you be unhappy about that quality in yourself?" That's a "Why do you believe that?" question.

More sophisticated people might say "No, of course they wouldn't have to be unhappy, but I know their beliefs and I know they believe they have to be unhappy, and I know if I do it, they will be." I then might use a question like, "Why are other people not allowed to do what they have to do?" Which brings up the question, "Why are you not allowed to do what you have to do?"

"Why aren't people allowed to be unhappy if they have to be? Why aren't I allowed to be unhappy?" When we're very unhappy or if we're unhappy about other people being unhappy, what it boils down to is, "I'm not allowed to be unhappy" so it's a depression, again.

If you're unhappy about someone else's being unhappy, it's just simply because you're not allowed to be unhappy. How else could you ever be unhappy about someone else's being unhappy?

For the patient who comes into your office, though, the very first question you're going to ask them is not, "Why do you believe you ever have to be unhappy about anything?" because they will hear "Why the hell do you believe you have to be unhappy?" In a particular situation you say, "Okay, what is there about what person does that makes you unhappy?" They'll get to, "Okay, I don't really have to be unhappy about it" In time

"Why do you believe you have to be unhappy?" And that's basically the whole Option Method!

Misapplied to yourself, we ask "Why would I have to be unhappy? What is there ever that I would have to be unhappy about?" and each of us answers to ourselves, "Nothing. There's nothing that we ever HAVE to be unhappy about." And then we deduce that we must like being unhappy, which becomes depression. Once you've deduced, "Oh, there's nothing I have to be unhappy about, but I must like it." you're depressed instantly. How could you believe you *like* being unhappy, and be happy?

"There's something wrong with me because I have a tendency towards something I don't like. I tend to do something that I really don't enjoy." (in fact, "don't enjoy" means "unhappy") "I'm wanting to feel a way I don't want to feel"

The only reason a person has a fear is that they'd be more afraid not to have that fear. So the greatest of all fears, is the fear of not fearing. We have both a tremendous desire to stop fearing, and at the same time a great fear of not fearing, and so when we ask a person, "What are you afraid would happen if you weren't afraid?" You'll get their answer, whatever it will be, and it usually takes the form, "I'd be more afraid that..."

For example:

Practitioner: "What are you afraid would happen if you stopped feeling bad about that? If that was okay?"

Client: "Oh, that'd be tremendous if I stopped feeling bad,"

Practitioner: "You would really feel good if such-and-such a thing happened?"

Client: “Oh, no.”

Practitioner: “Okay, well, what are you afraid would happen if you didn’t feel bad?”

More specifically:

Practitioner: “Why would you feel bad if your wife is unhappy with you?”

Client: “I don’t know.”

Practitioner: “Well, what are you afraid would happen if you didn’t feel bad every time she got unhappy?”

Client: “That’d be great. That’d be fantastic. Our marriage would be better, everything would be better.”

Practitioner: “You mean it would really be okay with you if she got unhappy?”

Client: “Oh, well, no, it wouldn’t.”

Practitioner: “Okay, why? What are you afraid would happen if it was okay with you?”

Client: “But then I’d have no problem.”

Practitioner: “If you really believed you have no problem you would be choosing that. You’d want to feel that way. So why wouldn’t you want to feel that way?”

Sometimes I use “What would be the disadvantage to you of thinking it is okay?” Or, “What would be the threat to you to think it is okay? And if there was something to be unhappy about, what would it be, if you felt it was okay for your wife to be unhappy and not to change?”

And you keep going until they come up with something. Usually what they come up with is, “Well, if it was okay it would mean I didn’t care. It would mean I didn’t want it to be better.”

It’s the first time in their life that they’ve ever heard that question. We feel that all the questions in the world have been asked, but this is the very first time in our lives that such questions have been asked.

And so I have patients who frequently say, “I don’t know” and then answer me. Their initial response is always, “I don’t know.” Yes, *of course* they don’t know. Up until then they’ve

never been asked such a question. Then they think about it and they answer. And if you're using these questions, you're asking questions of people that have never been asked of them before – ever.

And so such questions are what they call “mind-blowers”. A mind-blowing question is just simply a question that's never been asked, that is being asked seriously now.

Appendix: Exploring “I Don’t Know”

There's no mystery about feeling bad. It's impossible to feel bad without knowing why.

Option is the only method that doesn't take “I don't know” as an answer. And everybody else will kind of go for that and accept that.

When people say, “I don't know?”, there are a couple of responses I might use. “Why don't you know?”, “What are you afraid of knowing?” Or, “what would you be afraid of if you knew?” I have a patient who consistently says, “I don't know.” I sit. I count to three. And he tells me.

My technique is first silence. Then I keep repeating the question. If they're really stuck on it, I ask the opposite. What would they be afraid of if certain thing happens? Because then “I don't know” comes to, “why do you believe that that's bad or why would you be unhappy about that.”

“What are you afraid would happen if you weren't unhappy about it?” That's another way to get through an “I don't know.”

Other approaches: “What if you did know? What would it be?” That, surprisingly, works. Or “what are you most afraid of it being? What are you most afraid of the reason being? What would you be afraid of if you knew?” The compulsive might respond, “if I knew I'd have to give it up.” I ask them, “why do you believe you'd have to give it up if you knew?”

Why would you believe you would give up a behavior that you felt was protecting you while you still believed it was necessary to have? Each thing that comes up, you work with it. And it's just another thing to be unhappy about, and so you deal with that. You have the person who says “I don't know why I'd be unhappy. I just don't feel right.” And what they're constantly afraid of doing is making a decision, even about what it is that makes them unhappy. They're constantly afraid of being wrong.

“Why are you afraid of telling me the wrong reason”, you say. They respond, “If I gave the wrong reason I won't get help.” You could respond, “What are you afraid would happen if you didn't get help?”

I might respond “If for some reason or another I'm not able to help you, why do you believe you can't help you? Why do you believe you need help?” Then we're off again. Because there are many patients where it really becomes very clear that the place you start is “Why are you here and why do you believe you need help? And what if you don't get what you're looking for?”