

# Impact Techniques:

by Danie Beaulieu, PhD

Applying our Knowledge of Human Memory Systems to Psychotherapy



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## Abstract

Successful psychotherapy often depends on assisting clients change perceptions, thought patterns, or behaviors and adopt more healthful ones. These changes depend on acquisition of new information or insights, which must be laid down as new memories. Impact Techniques were developed to incorporate our knowledge about human memory systems into psychotherapeutic interventions to produce more rapid and lasting progress. This article presents a brief examination of the mnemotechnique principles underlying Impact Techniques. These simple techniques use multisensory interventions that make abstract concepts concrete, stimulate the client's emotions and interest, and build on the client's knowledge base, all the while adding pleasure and avoiding excessive repetition. The result is an approach that can be incorporated into any practice, adding efficacy and increasing satisfaction for both therapist and client.



While it has been well-established that implicit and explicit memory formation are strengthened by multisensory experience (Calvert, Spence, & Stein, 2004), this fact has not been fully exploited in standard psychotherapeutic approaches. Although a number of specialized approaches have been developed that emphasize experiential interventions, such as play therapy, adventure therapy, and psychodrama, for many (if not most) psychotherapists and their clients, these approaches are difficult to implement in the context of hour-long, in-office appointments. To incorporate the concepts underlying these specialized approaches into a more accessible and readily applicable method, Impact Techniques were developed. Recognizing that a primary goal of psychotherapy is to generate and reinforce new insights and life-skills that can stand up to the challenges of the rich, stimulating, multisensory experiences of daily life, Impact Techniques aims to make the experience in the therapist's office an equally rich, stimulating, and multisensory experience.

Impact Techniques are multisensory intervention methods based on how the brain perceives, learns, and retains information and thus can create a durable impact on the client. They are derived from Impact Therapy, an integrative approach that draws on the multisensory and experiential elements of many therapeutic approaches including Ericksonian hypnosis, solution-oriented psychotherapy, Reality Therapy, Neurolinguistic Programming, Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy, Transactional Analysis, Gestalt, and, recently, Proaction Theory (Beaulieu, 2006; Jacobs, 1992; Jacobs, 1994). Using simple objects—plastic or Styrofoam cups, sheets of paper, playing cards, modeling clay, video and audio cassettes, sticky notes, and rubber bands—as well as chairs, staging, and movements—the Impact approach can add energy, focus, and effectiveness to psychotherapy by making abstract concepts concrete

and creating visible, tangible metaphors (Beaulieu, 2006). In addition, because these Techniques are easily accessible to both the therapist and client, they can be easily incorporated into the therapist's current approach (Beaulieu, 2003; 2004).

To explain how Impact Techniques work and why they are effective, consider the following example, just one of hundreds of interventions that can be tailored to almost any problem and almost any clientele. A therapist is meeting with an elderly woman in a retirement home. She has withdrawn into herself and routinely refuses to participate in activities with the other residents and risks falling into an increasingly severe depression. Rather than simply talking with her, exploring her past and present, and encouraging her to participate more in the future, the therapist takes out a deck of cards.

"Do you play cards?" the therapist asks.

She begins to answer, "No, not any more. I'd rather stay . . ."

"Well, how about if we play a little game of poker, just you and me?" he interrupts.

He deals out five cards each and explains that the object is to build a good hand—cards in a series or combinations of the same suit or number—by exchanging the cards with those in the deck. While explaining, he rifles through the deck and pulls out the best hand he can—four aces and a king.

He then asks the client what she has, and she reveals a pair of fours. "Oh, too bad! You lose! No problem, we'll play another round."

He deals again and continues in the same manner, never giving the client the chance to ask for new cards and making a good hand for himself by taking the cards he wants from the deck. Naturally, after a couple of rounds the client objects.

"But this isn't fair! You pull out all the good cards for yourself and you don't give me any!"

This is the opportunity for which the therapist has been waiting. "Isn't it more accurate to say that you haven't asked me for better cards? You know, since you arrived here, we've been trying our best to offer you good cards, but you always refuse when we offer to introduce you to some people here or to help you get started in the various activities. But I know you're holding some great cards: you're quite healthy, your mind works just fine, and you've already accomplished a lot in your life. You have all these trump cards in your hand, but you always play your two of clubs by saying that everything is useless, that you would rather remain isolated, and that nobody loves you. If you would just use the good cards you're already holding and go after the other cards that you need, I know that your experience here could be transformed."

The therapist could go on to construct a "perfect hand" with the client, including her own strong cards (an ace for physical health, a king for her mental acuity, a queen for her loving nature), and add cards from the deck to complete it (a jack for the support of the staff and a ten for social interactions with the other residents). Leaving the cards with her at end of the session serves as a reminder of the strong hand she is holding in life.

Interventions like this invariably have a strong effect on the client because they exploit mnemotechniques—principles whose application favors the rapid creation of strong memory imprints. "Mnemotechnics" or mnemonic devices have been used for centuries to help people memorize information and improve their memory (Bellezza, 1981; Gruneberg, Sykes, & Gillett, 1994); the mnemotechniques of Impact Techniques allow psychotherapists to apply the same underlying principles of memory acquisition to the task of helping their clients. The remainder of this article will present

the eight major mnemotechnique principles and examine how they can be incorporated into standard psychotherapy practice.

### **Mnemotechnique Principle 1: Add Multisensory Experience**

We are all multisensory learners every day, so when we focus exclusively on words in a session with a client, we are neglecting the vast majority of their sensory input systems (Calvert, Spence, & Stein, 2004). By adding the visual and tactile stimuli of colorful playing cards—“talking” to the client’s eyes—we engage two other powerful learning systems in the process in addition to the verbal. Vision alone accounts for an estimated 60%–80% of the information processed by the average person’s brain (Sylwester, 1995), so just adding carefully chosen visual content to our verbal interactions greatly increases the efficiency with which messages are transmitted. For the Impact therapist, the essential question is not “How can I say this to my client?” but rather, “How can I show him or her or make him or her experience this?” In our example, rather than simply discuss the problem, the client could see and feel the problem as represented by the cards.

Research supports this approach: the cortical responses in the auditory and visual areas of the brain increase more when a subject is exposed to a bimodal sensorial stimulus compared to the total of the responses to separate unimodal visual and auditory stimuli. In other words, more neurons are activated when a message combines both visual and verbal elements compared to the sum of the activity provoked when each of these modalities are stimulated separately (Calvert, 2001). In practical terms, this means that when we involve the client’s visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic senses in an intervention, we are amplifying our impact. The senses work synergistically, not only to comprehend the message being transmitted, but to record and recall it.

This principle is consistently applied

in all Impact Techniques. A series of cups and a pitcher of water can be used to explore the aspects of a client’s life (work, family, self, recreation, community, as represented by the cups) in which he or she is investing his or her energy (represented by the water). Moving from one chair to another can permit a client to physically “inhabit” different ego states. An old videotape can transform the client’s disturbing childhood memories into a concrete, tangible form. In each case, putting an object in the client’s hands or actively involving him or her in movement creates a multisensory experience to reinforce a discussion and go beyond the use of words.

### **Mnemotechnique Principle 2: Make the Abstract Concrete**

Soft as a kitten. Reliable as a Swiss watch. Strong as a bull.

Similies like these are often extended into concrete metaphors by advertisers, whose experts in marketing psychology know that the brain retains concrete representations much better than abstract notions (Mcquarrie & Phillips, 2002). The use of figurative language, metaphors, and allegory in psychotherapy has been advocated by others as a way of representing abstract concepts (Close, 1998; Erickson and Rossi, 1979; Sieligman, 1993). Likewise, concrete representations of situations have been used extensively in play therapy and role-playing (Blatner, 2000; Bromfield, 1997). Impact Techniques combines these two approaches by creating a concrete representation of a metaphor developed specifically to address the client’s difficulties. This visible and tangible metaphor can then be manipulated to explore the problem and possible solutions.

For example, when working with a woman who has withdrawn from her family and social and professional contacts following the death of her son, her therapist was able to make a simple sheet of paper become eloquent. The client was asked to take a full sheet of paper and fold it in two, and in two again, and

again, until she could do so no longer. The therapist then told the client that what she just did to the paper was like what she had been doing to herself. The therapist took a new sheet of paper and folded it, while saying that the full sheet represented the client’s full potential.

“When your son died, you told yourself: I don’t want to love anymore. It is too painful. And you did this,” folding the sheet again, “cutting yourself off from at least half of your potential. Then you said “I don’t want to go to work,” folding the sheet again, “And that you didn’t care for your husband because he said you had to go on and didn’t understand you” folding the sheet in half again with each statement.

The therapist continued, mentioning the progressive, self-imposed limitations that the woman’s conscious and unconscious decisions had led to, folding the paper until it could not be folded more. The therapist concluded, holding out the folded little rectangle, “and here you are today, feeling small, depressed, and alone. I’m sorry that I cannot bring your child back, but if you agree to reverse the process and begin opening up again,” the therapists continued, unfolding the paper slightly, “you can certainly be happy and strong again.”

In establishing the sheet of paper as a metaphor for the client’s choices and her resulting situation, the therapist has concretely demonstrated not only that he has understood the client’s situation, but also that something can be done about it. Talking about the abstract notions of withdrawal and isolation without the help of a concrete metaphor is often an unproductive exercise, especially when working with a person whose isolation and depression are long-standing. The sheet of paper turns the concepts into something that can be seen, touched, handled, and, importantly, reversed. If the client chooses, with the therapist’s assistance, she can unfold like the paper and re-engage with her family and friends. She can choose to open up, step by step, to regain her full potential in

spite of the loss of her son.

Any simple object can take on diverse metaphorical meanings adapted to the situation the client is dealing with. The sheet of paper in the preceding example can be applied to any situation of loss: a physical handicap caused by an accident, a failure at school, or a humiliation. In each case, involving the client at the outset by having them fold the paper, even before they are aware of its symbolic meaning, renders the metaphor tactile and kinesthetic. The implicit message is that they have folded the paper (chosen their maladaptive patterns) and they can unfold it (choose patterns that increase their well-being).

### **Mnemotechnique Principle 3: Build Knowledge on Knowledge**

Imagine attending a talk on quantum physics with a group of experts. As the speaker holds forth about quarks and gluons—and the audience of physicists nods in understanding—you feel increasingly lost. Without a background in that branch of science, you have no basis for integrating the information presented. Our clients do not come to us for a class in psychology, and most do not understand the concepts of neurosis, defense mechanisms, projection, and superego. But when you create an experience based on what they do know, such as the value of different cards in a deck, you implicitly reawaken a host of cognitive, emotional, visual, and kinesthetic memories, often without the client's conscious awareness. Everyone wants to hold a winning hand and would rather see a royal straight than a pair of threes. A connection to what the client already knows creates an opening, permitting better assimilation of the message you want to transmit. An accessible metaphor such as the card game can also be exploited to contact the client's resources and teach new life skills where needed. How can she go about changing any weak cards for better ones? Perhaps by working with the staff or taking the initiative with her family. How can she play her strong cards to the best advan-

tage? Perhaps by staying active and participating in group activities.

### **Mnemotechnique Principle 4: Stimulate Emotions**

Our strongest memories are etched when we are under the influence of strong emotions (McGaugh, 2003). Whether joy or sorrow, thrill or fear, emotionally arousing events prime the mind for later recall by activating the amygdala and stimulating the release of stress hormones, as demonstrated by fMRI (Canli, Zhao, Brewer, Gabrieli, & Cahill, 2000; LaBar & Cabeza, 2006) and pharmacological techniques (Cahill & McGaugh, 1998; Phelps & LeDoux, 2005). In psychotherapy we can use this knowledge to stimulate and consolidate change and personal growth using at least three techniques: incorporating emotionally charged objects in our interventions, dramatizing a situation to amplify the intensity of the intervention, or creating codes. To various extents, all three techniques were used in our first example. For most people, playing cards is associated with positive memories of whiling away the time with friends and family with a hard-fought game of bridge or a rowdy game of go fish! The client's almost automatic willingness to participate bears witness to this and consequently creates an opportunity. The card game also allows the therapist to dramatize the client's reclusive behavior, provoking puzzlement, curiosity, and, eventually, outrage before resolving those heightened feelings with an explanation. Finally, the cards frequently become a code between the client and therapist, in which the therapist will inquire if the client has "played her queen of hearts this week" or the client will report that her "ace of spades was really useful yesterday." All three of these facets of the intervention heighten the emotional tone and hence the chances that the client will remember the message long after the session, as well as enhancing the bond between client and therapist, further increasing the efficacy of the intervention.

### **Mnemotechnique Principle 5: Arouse Interest**

Attention and memory are intimately linked, both for implicit and explicit memory systems (Anderson, Craik, & Naveh-Benjamin, 1998; Craik, Govoni, Naveh-Benjamin, & Anderson, 1996; Turk-Browne, Yi, & Chun, 2006). It is not surprising, then, that clients often seem to forget much of what is said in one session long before they return for the next: they simply were not paying all that much attention, whether because of intrinsically decreased attention due to depression or other attention deficits, or because they were attending to an inner dialogue or simply preoccupied with other distractions. To be effective, an intervention must be remembered, and thus it is essential to focus the client's attention on the task at hand. We can arouse the client's interest by creating surprise or eliciting desire.

When a therapist creates a novel experience (pulling out a pack of cards and dealing out a couple of poker hands), the client's brain attempts to complete an incomplete data set. Asking a client to fold a piece of paper without offering an explanation for the exercise accomplishes the same task. Instantly, the client is more engaged, more attentive, and any message attached to the activity will be more effectively transmitted. The more effective the therapist is in stimulating and retaining the client's interest, the better chance he or she has of making a difference.

### **Mnemotechnique Principle 6: The Pleasure Principle**

It is stating the obvious to observe that human beings seek pleasure, but it is a principle rarely applied actively in psychotherapy, which is often considered to be difficult or heart-wrenching work. Yet humans, like all other animals, are attracted to and will return to things that give them pleasure and avoid those that are distasteful or painful (Freud, 1990). Talking in direct and explicit terms about

painful past experiences is often draining to clients, but using a flexible metaphor to translate the terms under discussion can take some of the sting away and allow a productive exploration of the case. Likewise, actively adding pleasure to the intervention by playing poker—albeit a very special version of the game—will usually neutralize any avoidance reflex or resistance and trigger the positive energy needed to develop a new perspective on the problem and to resolve it.

Another illustration of how pleasure can help lower the barriers to the therapeutic progress is provided by the common situation of counseling a young person who has begun experimenting with drugs. The therapist offers a quarter to the client, heads up, on an open palm. The offer of money, of any denomination, normally evokes a pleasure response, creating a brief opening in the client's resistance to talking about the risks of drug use. As the client reaches for the coin, the therapist says, "Wait! Take only the word "Liberty" off the quarter, not the coin itself." Clearly, the client will realize that this is impossible. The therapist then establishes the link, explaining that the feeling of liberty that drugs sometimes provide is inseparable from the difficulties—*anxiety, deceit, tense family relationships, trouble concentrating, problems in school, and financial and legal problems*—that drug use almost inevitably entails. The coin then becomes the symbol for the complex issues surrounding drug use, allowing the therapist to address the central issues (self-control rather than immediate gratification and the consequences of choices) while not putting the client completely on the defensive.

### **Mnemotechnique Principle 7: Simplicity is the Ultimate Sophistication**

Memorable advertising slogans, commercial jingles, and workshop presentations all have one thing in common: simplicity. That's why so many people cannot get the latest commercial jingle out of

their heads, whereas a long complicated scientific explanation is easily forgotten. Sometimes less really is more, as demonstrated by studies of visual working memory using simple and complex stimuli (Triesch, Ballard, Hayhoe, & Sullivan, 2003; Eng, Chen, & Jiang, 2005). Flooding a client, or allowing them to flood the session, with an overabundance of detail, nuance, and "ifs, "ands," or "buts" leads to dilution, not reinforcement, of the message or new insights you are trying to develop. Working with a simple metaphor or using simple objects like playing cards anchors the discussion and exploration in a very accessible, tangible plane. Again, clients are not looking for a class in psychology. They are trying to get past a stumbling block in their lives. A simple, direct representation of the client's strengths as a good poker hand is not fancy, but it is effective.

In many instances, sand in a cup can become a simple evaluation tool that graphically represents the progress a client has made in therapy. A 40-year-old woman was consulting after seeing several therapists previously. As she described her unresolved anger toward her parents, who had not supported her studies and had thus—according to her—thwarted her career ambitions, the therapist recognized that this was a long-standing tape loop of complaint. Interrupting her, the therapist poured sand into a cup and presented it to the client. "If this sand represents all of the frustration and anger that you feel, how much would you remove to represent the progress you have made in your previous therapy?" The client was forced to admit that she would take nothing out of the cup, as she still felt as angry as ever. This admission provided an opening for the therapist to suggest that a different approach was needed and to secure the client's cooperation in a more proactive approach and fuller engagement in the therapeutic process. The same tool can be used in assessing the progress of a client from session to session or to determine if the client is ready to stop therapy.

### **Mnemotechnique Principle 8: Repetition . . . Without Having to Repeat**

Educational psychologists have long recognized that mastery of new information or a new skill requires repeated exposure (Reynolds & Glaser, 1964), and even learning a person's name is easier if introductions are repeated (Morris & Fritz, 2000). The problem is, repetition rapidly becomes boring to both therapist and client, which is entirely contrary to Mnemotechnique 5. The simple props used in Impact Techniques resolve this dilemma. By choosing common, everyday objects, which the client will encounter in their daily life or can carry with them after the session, the therapist is relieved of the task of repetition. Each time the client sees the object, which has taken on the symbolic meaning of the metaphor that was elaborated together, the message originally conveyed will be reinforced.

The client in our first example can take her "winning hand" with her as a constant reminder of all the resources available to her and the pleasure of "playing" them to her best advantage. By placing the cards in her purse, a pocket, or on her desk or dresser, she is assured of encountering this message many times each week. Likewise, the woman who has withdrawn from her social contacts can carry her folded paper with her and give herself courage by holding and unfolding the paper when preparing to step forward in her life. The young man can carry his lucky quarter to help him remain strong when tempted by drugs, knowing that he has his therapist's support. The woman in our last example can place her cup full of sand on her bedside table to remind her that her goal is to let go of her anger and let it drain away.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined just a few examples of how mnemotechniques can be applied to enhance the efficacy of psychotherapy. In addition to the effects on memory, the positive energy between the therapist and the client that is fostered by

implementation of Impact Techniques can add significantly to the productivity of the session and rapidly help build a strong therapeutic relationship. Because of the client's active involvement in the development and exploration of the metaphor or staging, the treatment remains completely ecologic with respect to the client's experience. And finally, Impact Techniques can add to the satisfaction of both the client and the therapist because both are fully engaged in an active process and the resulting progress is tangible.

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