

Setting An Agenda

An extract from the textbook, 'Trauma-Focused ACT', by Russ Harris

It's often a good idea to set an agenda for sessions. Some therapists initially resist this, complaining it's "too directive." However, once they accept their discomfort and try it out, they find sessions become far more productive. There is no "official" way to prioritize items on an agenda, but the following sequence works well:

1. Risk of self-harm. If there's significant risk that clients may harm themselves, this obviously takes priority over anything else. (See chapter twenty-six.)
2. Teamwork troubles. Many things can cause tension or discord in the therapeutic relationship: the client missing sessions, not paying bills, or being aggressive or dismissive; the therapist being coercive, invalidating, or lacking in empathy. We want to identify the problem and address it as soon as possible. (See chapter nineteen.)
3. Session stoppers. Next on the agenda are client behaviors that stall or disrupt the session: repeatedly coming up with reasons why therapy can't work or why they can't change, refusing to do exercises, problem hopping, continually changing topics, and so on. (See chapter nineteen.)
4. Homework horrors. If clients aren't doing their homework, we want to find out what the barriers are and help the client overcome them. (See chapter eighteen.)
5. Other issues. For the remaining problems, there are several ways to prioritize:
 - a. Encourage the client to choose: "Out of all the issues you're dealing with currently, which one would you like to tackle first?"
 - b. Use the bull's eye; ask the client to pick just one quadrant, and the most pressing problem within it.
 - c. Focus on whichever seems to be the least difficult issue—the one most likely amenable to quick but significant change.

Working Through the Agenda

Once the agenda is agreed upon, we work through it, item by item. Occasionally an entire session may focus on just the first item, but often we can cover several.

No matter what issues the client chooses to focus on, in each session, we "dance around the triflex." We begin each session with "being present," which gives us a secure foundation for "opening up" (defusing from, accepting, and responding with self-compassion to difficult cognitions and emotions). And if clients become overwhelmed at any point, we drop anchor and bring them back to the present; then, when they're centered and willing, we venture forth once more into "opening up."

The same holds true for "doing what matters." Clarifying values, setting goals, and creating action plans can sometimes trigger overwhelming emotions or extreme fusion. If so—yes, you guessed it—we help clients drop anchor. Then, once they are present and centered, we gently return to values and committed action. Naturally, some sessions focus far more on one aspect of the triflex than the others, but usually all three are involved to some extent.