

IMPACT TECHNIQUES

for therapists



Danie Beaulieu, Ph.D.

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*I warmly dedicate this book to
all my colleagues who share
my passion for helping people
fully become themselves.*

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Translated from the French by Heidi S. Hoff

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Preface

What are Impact Techniques? One answer is: they are techniques stemming from Impact Therapy, an approach developed by Edward Jacobs, Ph.D., professor of counseling psychology and rehabilitation at West Virginia University. Impact Therapy is distinct in its eclectic approach and its synergistic integration of many contemporary models of psychotherapeutic intervention, particularly Ericksonian hypnosis, solution-oriented psychotherapy, Reality Therapy, Neurolinguistic Programming, Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, Transactional Analysis, Gestalt, and, recently, Proaction Theory.

Another way of describing Impact Techniques would simply be to say that they are techniques with a lot of Impact because they permit clients to record more rapidly and remember longer the important messages transmitted during a therapy session. Why? Because Impact Techniques respect mnemonic laws, in other words, the principles whose application permits our memory systems to easily and permanently assimilate information. This is what most particularly characterizes Impact Therapy: the use of mnemotechniques—techniques and tricks that enhance the creation and retention of new memories—that notably make use of multisensory communication to translate messages into the various languages of the body. It is a question of talking not only to the client's ears, but also to their eyes, body, and all the human sensory modalities. Memory contains much more than just words, which becomes particularly significant when treating children or any client with a limited aptitude for verbal expression.

These mnemonic laws have been the subject of many studies, research projects, and articles, but for some inexplicable reason—unless we can blame Freud or Rogers and their praise for therapeutic neutrality—they have never been put to good use in psychotherapy. In fact, the people who use this avant-garde knowledge are mostly marketing experts—and they use it to sell hamburgers, cigarettes, and beer! They understand how memory functions better than do most psychotherapists. By way of proof, you just have to look at the results they obtain from 30-second commercials that are shown just a few times! They can adroitly modify consumer behavior without the consumer even noticing and without encountering resistance. We may not agree with the means they use to attain their ends, but we cannot deny their effectiveness. These specialists possess knowledge that every therapist should master. These same mnemonic tools can add enormously to the impact of the helping process, in less time, while permitting us to reach people who do not respond to the conventional methods of “talk therapy,” that is, approaches based solely on verbal modalities.

My objective in this book is to provide you with knowledge of mnemotechniques that can be integrated into your work and to offer you a host of Impact Techniques you can use with

your clients—no matter which approach you currently favor. My hope is that, using these techniques, you will find a justification for the creativity that you already bring to each intervention, discover new ways of working with your clients, and experience a surge of renewed energy and enthusiasm for helping your clients.

Good reading!

Danie Beaulieu, Ph.D.

Introduction

Fundamentals of Impact Techniques

When I use or present Impact Techniques, I always get some remarkable reactions. People are always surprised to feel so much impact from such simple objects and experiences. But nothing is surprising about it when we understand how the brain and memory function. The following section presents the eight major mnemotechnique principles whose application favor the creation of more rapid and stronger memory imprints when working with your clients, as well as examples of their use in psychotherapy.

Mnemotechnique Principle #1: Take Multisensory Learning into Account

Human beings learn from the totality of their senses, not only with their ears, the sense that psychotherapy tends to depend on most, if not exclusively. In fact, the “audio system” is one of the least important sensory modalities in neuropsychological terms and one of the least reliable. Have you ever spoken to a client and become conscious that, not only was he not listening to you, but he was recording some other information entirely while you were doing your utmost to help him? This type of failed impact greatly affects the morale of the helping professional and the quality of the therapist–client relationship, as well as leading to a certain demotivation for both parties. We often turn to the well-known response: “Well, he just wasn’t ready” or “I tried everything,” which really means, “I said everything I could say. He doesn’t understand, so I can’t do anything else for him.”

Fortunately, other sensory systems can be used to reach people and often they are much more efficient. Among these we find notably the “video system”: the eyes. Did you know that studies of human neurophysiology have estimated that 60% of the information that flows to the brain comes via the eyes? How many of us have learned to talk to our clients’ eyes? Think about it: Are radio commercials more or less effective than television commercials? Why? The answer is clear: if we talk to the eyes in addition to recruiting the verbal centers of the brain, we greatly increase the effect we can have on the person receiving the message. 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 make him experience this?”

These postulates have been the subject of scientific research. It has been demonstrated many times that 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 is stimulated separately (Calvert, 2001; Calvert, Brammer, Bullmore, et al., 1999; Calvert, Campbell, & Brammer, 2000; Calvert, Hansen, Iversen, et al., 2001). In addition, adding a visual component to a message engages some regions of the brain involved in memory functions more rapidly and automatically (Grady, McIntosh, Rajah, et al., 1997).

Let’s look at an example of this multisensory principle as it applies to psychotherapy.

You are meeting with a young man who has everything he needs to succeed in school but who fails because he doesn’t apply himself. Young people can easily tell when an adult is about to give them a moral lesson: before the first word is even spoken, the child has already turned off his “headphones.” We have all been there, haven’t we? In contrast, every child is interested by an unexpected surprise. To foil his resistance, recruit his other senses and create a visual and kinesthetic experience. Place several plastic cups on the table to represent different “departments” of his life (e.g., skateboarding, Internet, friends, TV, video games) and save the last one for school. Already, you have generated a new response in the boy: instead of being on the defensive, he is interested and trying to understand the reason for this bit of staging. Involve him physically by giving him a cup filled with water. Explain to him that the water represents all the energy he has and ask him to distribute the water in the plastic cups to show you where he invested his energy during the past week. Did he go skateboarding, surf the Internet, play with friends, watch television? The boy should pour water into each of the cups to show the amount of time he devoted to each activity. Since the cup for school is placed last in the row, chances are that he will not have much water left for that aspect of his life. As there is a direct proportional relationship between our investment and the results we obtain, it is easy to *see* why school is not going so well. You can certainly *say* the same things to the boy, but if his eyes have not understood the message, it usually will not be recorded with as much impact. Guillemette Isnard, the French neurophysiologist, affirms that “information is integrated when all the senses have had their say” (Isnard, 1990, p. 79). The young man now has three keys to retrieve the information: the verbal key, the visual key, and the kinesthetic key. These three senses will work synergistically to repeat the same message. By involving more neurons, we amplify our intervention. It is like trying to push a very heavy weight: it is much easier for three people working together to make it move than for one person working alone.

Note that, by creating a little scene with such staging, you create the possibility of continuing to explore the metaphor and “seeding” solutions. For example, you can pour the water back into the original cup and ask the boy to show you what he should do if he wants to do better in school. At once, his body is engaged in creating that possibility and in creating his new version. It does not matter whether the verbal modality resists, the body will have already recorded the information. In the following sessions, you can revisit this experience and thus radically reduce the warm-up period that occurs at the beginning of every session. The cups can become your assessment tool to evaluate the actions taken during the previous week. Where did the client invest his energy during that time? Did he get the results he was hoping for?

Impact Techniques are also very flexible. The technique in the preceding example could also work well with young people who do not invest themselves in their friendships or extracurricular activities (or the opposite), and with those who invest too much energy in their failures, their parents’ divorce, or in self-denigration. This technique could also suit adults, to help them reflect on the investment they make in various aspects of daily life.

When creating such an experience, only a few words are necessary. The information is illustrated, recorded, and integrated in a novel way, without being reshaped by the verbal thought process.

Children are among those who have the most difficulty with words, not only when learning them, but also when using them to express their feelings. In contrast, their spontaneity and their transparency are fully put to good use with the Impact approach. They feel naturally competent and at ease in a situation in which implicit language is used to communicate. Adults and adolescents are equally attracted by the simplicity, efficacy, and concrete aspect of this approach. In addition, they feel smart because they grasp the message and integrate it rapidly. All these elements favor not only better use of memory systems, but also increased motivation and improvement of the therapeutic relationship.

That does not mean that we should abandon the verbal modality. For one thing, that would be practically impossible in the context of psychotherapy and, for another, the use of words can most certainly add to the process. Words really do possess enormous power. The ad men at McDonald’s know this well. Have you ever heard a competitor’s name mentioned in their ads or heard them talk about microwaves, fatty meals, or frozen foods? Of course not. Instead, they choose words that attract, that create desire in consumers, and that are congruent with their projected values. They use words that interest and engage the potential customer, like “delicious,” “fresh,” “fast,” suggesting that it is the perfect place for a family outing with the kids.

In an experiment on the power of words, photos of two beautiful women were presented to a group of volunteers, who were then asked which of the two women they found the prettiest. In the first vote, the group split about 50:50. Then, the same experiment was conducted with a fresh group of subjects, but they were told that the name of the first woman was Jennifer and that of the second woman was Gertrude. The first woman received 80% of the votes (Kotler,

2003). Words, like the names in that experiment, can push buttons on our inner control boards, activating the circuits of related past experiences. Each word activates the neural circuits that are specific to that word, with all their sensory and affective content. For therapeutic purposes, it is a question of knowing how to wake up the networks that will help our clients generate the desired thoughts and actions. This realization gives one pause when therapists so commonly ask questions such as “Do you feel depressed? Have you been thinking about suicide?” Similarly, questions such as “What is the problem?” lead the client to focus on what is not going well. In contrast, if you ask “What changes do you want to make in your life currently?” or “What would you like to improve in your life?”, this allows clients to pay attention to what they would like to add to their lives and to become proactive in making progress toward their own goals.

It is also clear that words expressing metaphors make the right hemisphere of the brain become more involved, in contrast to purely explicit language that recruits primarily the left hemisphere (Bottini, Corcoran, Sterzi, et al., 1994; Brownell, Simpson, Bihrlé, et al., 1990; Faust & Weisper, 2000). This information is important when we consider that “the activation or creation of connections between thousands of neurons will always increase the performance of the brain, never diminish it. This cannot but establish privileged communication between our sense organs and our cortical areas, and as a result, alter the interpretation, the perception that we have of the exterior world” (Isnard, 1990).

Thus, the verbal modality can have a remarkable impact on memory if one knows how to exploit its full potential.

Mnemotechnique Principle #2: Make Abstract Concepts Concrete

What do these three ads have in common? Toilet paper linked to the softness of kittens; an insurance company using an elephant as a logo to represent its strength, longevity, and size; and an appliance manufacturer using a bored repairman to illustrate the reliability of its equipment? The common denominator is that each offers the consumer a concrete symbol to incarnate the abstract qualities of their product or service. Why would they do that? It’s simple: the brain retains concrete information more easily than it does abstract ideas. Why not take this into account in the process of helping our clients?

For example, when my son Jordane was 9 years old, his third-grade teacher placed a great deal of emphasis on the value of solidarity. She gave a lot of importance to collaboration and mutual respect: it was at the heart of her teaching approach. After attending a parent-teacher meeting at the beginning of the year, during which she told us about her teaching philosophy, I returned home and asked Jordane if he knew what “solidarity” meant, since I knew that this was probably

a new word for him. He answered very seriously, “It’s real important to Mrs. Forest.” I repeated, “But do you know what it means?” I got the same answer again. Clearly, he had recorded with his body and eyes the degree to which this principle was important to his teacher, but he was completely ignorant of what it really involved. In fact, in pursuing my inquiry, I realized that he had created a definition based on what he already knew, that is the word “solid.” So every time Mrs. Forest talked about solidarity, my son showed his solidarity by becoming “solid” and rigid as an iron rod. Not the best conditions for learning.

Having detected that many of her students did not seem to understand what she wanted so much to teach them (I was relieved to learn that my son was not the only one in his class in that situation), his teacher asked me to create an Impact Technique that could help her students to understand her message. I suggested that she buy a 30-piece jigsaw puzzle and give one piece to each of the students (there were 26 in the class) and to distribute the remaining four pieces to herself and the three teaching aids. Children are very familiar with puzzles and associate them with pleasure, play, and the idea “I can do this.” They also know that each piece is different, each has its proper place, and all the pieces must be assembled to yield a complete and satisfying result. A perfect analogy to illustrate the role of each child in the class: each should contribute their own “piece” (even the shyest children will understand the importance of sharing their opinion) and respect others’ “pieces” (that is, their ideas and personality) because they are part of the whole “class puzzle.”

This metaphor also helps children recognize that there are different styles and shapes of pieces in the puzzle: “corner pieces,” who may prefer to be calm, without too many people around them; and “center pieces,” who like being in the thick of things, who are always raising their hand, ready to answer the teacher’s questions, and who have lots of friends. Then there are the “edge pieces” who adapt well to the needs of others—they are calm when they are near “corner pieces” and can be very active when they are with friends who have a more “center” style. To make a rapid and accurate assessment of a group at the beginning of the year, the teacher can offer a puzzle piece to each student and ask them to work together to assemble their pieces. As the body cannot lie, the teacher will rapidly see which students are “center pieces” (the first to dive into the game), “edge pieces” (who are alert, watchful, and ready to give their piece to a “center” student so that he or she can put it in the puzzle), and “corner pieces” (who remain in their seats or far from the group until things have calmed down around the table).

The exercise is so concrete that the students absorb the message while having fun, and recollection of its lessons is that much more powerful because the learning experience was based on coenesthesia, that is, general sensorial awareness. In the future, when dealing with a student who is overly assertive, the teacher just has to say, “Charles, have you already put in your piece today? Yes? Well then, it might be better to let others put theirs in, too.” At once the child remembers the images and sensations that remind him of the importance of thinking about the whole group and not just about his own personal benefit.