

Tip #103 Rolling With Resistance

*There is no way to make people like change.
You can only make them feel less threatened by it.*
Frederick Hayes

*This time like all times is a very good one
if we but know what to do with it.*
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Resistance to change comes up in our work often and clients who exhibit resistance are less likely to change. Resistance is what happens when we expect or push for change when the client is not ready for that change. Resistance is not something that exists in a client in a static sense. It arises as a **normal, expected product of the interaction**. When resistance emerges, there always are good reasons the client is not ready to change in the way we are asking. The reasons may not be clear to us or to the client, but they exist. Ignoring them gets us nowhere.

Our counseling style can either minimize or provoke resistance (See Tip #9.) Some of the techniques that **decrease the likelihood of evoking resistance** include:

- Reflecting what we hear without judgment
- Emphasizing personal choice and control
- Tracking closely a client's readiness
- Introducing behavior change as an experiment

When we do encounter resistant statements or behavior, it is easy to fall into a pattern of arguing or to push back. (See Tip #65, The Righting Reflex.) Rolling with resistance and skillfully working to elicit the client's own motivation to change are more effective. How can we **most skillfully roll with resistance in that first moment it arises?** The very *first* things we do and say when we encounter resistance have a profound effect on the rest of the session and on the client's change process.

Here are some directions to go:

1. Simply **reflect the resistant statement**: "You don't like this idea." "You haven't found any way to get exercise that works for you."
2. **Reflect the tone** of what you are hearing: "You're not happy about being here today." "You're discouraged with your hemoglobin A1C." "You are feeling hopeless about your weight."

3. **Reflect ambivalence:** “On the one hand you want... and on the other you don’t think you can ...”
4. **Acknowledge the resistance process:** “We seem to be arguing.” “I’ve gotten us off track here.”
5. **Support choice/control:** “It’s up to you.” “You’re the one in charge here.”

You can do several of these sequentially. For example, “You don’t like this idea of joining a gym. It *is* your choice.”

The more **simple and direct** the clinician response, the more effective it will be. For example, “You are feeling forced to be here today” may be more effective than “I know your mom took you out of school and brought you in here and you think it’s stupid to see a nutritionist.”

Many clinicians find it difficult or even **frightening to roll with resistance at first**. You may imagine you are drawing attention to the resistance when you want to minimize it. Careful analysis of sessions has shown that these “rolling with resistance” techniques do reduce the likelihood that the client will continue in a resistant stance.

It can be difficult to come up with these effective responses in the middle of a session. These moments are uncomfortable for us. It is so easy to revert to the righting reflex (Tip #65) and keep pushing. **Practice these “rolling with resistance” techniques over and over** to gain skill. If you have the opportunity to record some of your sessions or to listen in on others’ sessions, search for the client’s resistant statements. It’s much easier to do when you are not the one in the counselor’s seat. Form a rolling response and practice it.

Rolling with resistance is an ideal technique to **experiment** with all your clients. Notice the results and then decide whether to incorporate this into your style. It may take weeks or months of practice to gain confidence and competency.