Benefit Finding

Helgeson and colleagues (2006) define benefit finding as “the positive effects that result from a traumatic event” (p. 797). It is the process of deriving positive growth from adversity and has become a central construct in the evolution of positive psychology. Clients can report major positive changes as a result of challenging life events such as severe illness or trauma.

In general, research has revealed positive long-term effects of benefit finding. For instance, some individuals report a new appreciation of their own strength and resilience, an enhanced sense of purpose, greater spirituality, closer ties with others, and changes in life priorities. Others feel that their relationships are stronger and that they have become more compassionate or altruistic (e.g., Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Davis et al., 1998; McMillen et al., 1997).

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to create awareness of the possible benefits of challenging life events. This explicit focus on the positive characteristics of negative life events can help to boost resilience.

Advice

In this exercise, the participant will be asked to recall a traumatic life event. Be extra attentive of the participant during the exercise. Obviously, for most clients thinking of a difficult event will trigger negative thoughts and/or feelings.

- Make sure to acknowledge the painful experience. If the coach proceeds to the positive aspects of the event too early, the client may feel that he/she is not being understood or that the severity of the event is being underestimated. Consequently, the willingness to look at the event from another perspective is likely to be reduced.
- Considering life events from different viewpoints can be seen as a way to reduce dichotomous (black and white) thinking. The aim of the present exercise is to create a balanced perspective on negative life events, rather than to stimulate positive thinking. Especially when positive thinking is used to avoid negative feelings that accompany the traumatic life event, it can be considered as a form of experiential avoidance, and should be discouraged. It is important to inform clients about this distinction.
In general, the exercise works best when the event that is chosen lies far enough in the past to allow time to also bring positive aspects, like personal growth, renewed friendship and so on. When an event is chosen that occurred very recently, it can be very difficult if not impossible for a client to address the positive aspects of it. A client may be struggling too much with the negative emotions that arose from the event. Respect your client if he/she cannot make a positive shift in perspective and inform him/her that he/she can stop with the exercise at any given moment.

Benefit finding may not work for everyone. Although most studies show positive effects, mixed results have been obtained in the cancer literature. For instance, Sears, Stanton, and Danoff-Burg (2003) found no relation between initial benefit finding and distress a year later. In a study by Tomich and Helgeson (2004) initial benefit finding predicted elevated distress months later. Carver and Antoni (2004) have speculated that the experience of finding benefit may promote greater emotional turmoil in individuals with worse prognosis, causing negative affect.

**Suggested Readings**


Tool Description

Instructions

1. Have the client talk about a traumatic event (e.g. loss, severe physical injury etc.) in as much detail as possible for a few minutes. Have the client try to freely express any and all emotions and thoughts they have about the experience.

2. Now have the client focus on the positive aspects of the experience. Below are some questions to help guide the client:

   ■ How has the experience changed you?

   ■ What has the experience taught you?

   ■ How has the experience made you better equipped to meet similar challenges in the future?

   ■ Do you feel that this experience has made you grow as a person?