



T.I.P.s #1 & #2

“HANDS-ON” EXERCISES FOR FLEXIBLE THINKING

THEORY: These simple exercises are two of my favorites, and they go literally “hand in hand” to start a group thinking creatively. They are great warm-ups for a therapeutic group, workplace wellness workshop, or training seminar. In a group situation, this is a short but very powerful exercise that involves everyone. Although you can do this exercise with clients in individual treatment and make a very compelling case for the importance of flexible thinking, the group experience is ideal so that individuals can see firsthand that what is natural for us is not always natural for others. This focus of being flexible in slightly shifting one’s perspective is demonstrated powerfully yet simply in these two exercises.

T.I.P. #1 Finger Exercise—Get a Grip!

T.I.P. #2 Arm Folding Activity

T.I.P. #1 IMPLEMENTATION: Ask participants to clasp their hands so that their fingers interlock. Ask them to note which thumb is on top. In a group situation, ask them to raise their hands if they had their left thumb on top like me (noting to them that they can unclasp their hands now to raise their hands!). Usually roughly half the group raises their hands, regardless of right- or left-handedness. How many had their right thumb on top? Note the percentage now raising their hands. Note that what feels natural for some is not natural for others. Relate that idea to the idea of our perceptions; for example, we think people should see things the same way we do, and through this hands-on exercise we realize this is not true! Now have the group shift their fingers in the opposite way (make sure they clasp all their fingers differently, not just the thumbs). Ask the group how this feels. You likely will get responses such as, “weird, strange, uncomfortable.” Apply this hands-on exercise as a metaphor for the importance of how we often need to shift our thinking just so slightly—even though it might seem unnatural—in order to look at a situation in a different way. This can be a visual reminder of the importance of being flexible and changing one’s perspective, and to realizing that some people may struggle with something that might come naturally to you! In short, this exercise helps people “get a grip!”

T.I.P. #2 IMPLEMENTATION: Following the exercise in T.I.P. #1, have participants perform a more “advanced version.” In this exercise, have everyone fold their arms, noting which arm is on top. Ask for hands (urging them to let go first, of course) for those who had their right arm on top, etc. Bring to their

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attention that many people who began with their right thumb on top in T.I.P. #1 will have the opposite arm on top in this exercise. As in T.I.P. #1, the group likely will be roughly evenly split. Now have the group try it the other way. This usually gives way to giggles as some group members circle around a bit before finding their position. Most participants claim it feels “even weirder” than in T.I.P. #1, which gives you the opportunity to re-emphasize that what feels natural to some may be a stretch to others, and vice versa. Again, this provides a metaphor for the idea that people perceive things differently. We often assume inaccurately that others are innately more like us than they really are, which can be a frustrating misperception! (An interesting variation on this exercise is having the group fold their legs instead.)

PROCESSING: These are quick and easy hands-on examples of how some people might look at things in a more rational, healthy way, and some of us need to adjust our perceptions slightly in a way that is uncomfortable to us while very natural for others. How easy it is to comprehend how interpersonal misunderstandings occur in light of considering the lesson from these hands-on activities! We also often assume that people process things the way we do; we tend to assume too much rather than open up our minds. Encourage members that when they are under stress or depressed, anxious, etc. they can remind themselves to slightly shift perspective. One can shift those fingers to nudge oneself out of the one-dimensional thinking that often makes people feel stuck!

