Engaging Difficult Clients

By Lynn Grodzki, LCSW, MCC

Therapists are telling me that they are seeing a new, concerning trend: a client asks for therapy, but proves difficult to engage. Many of these clients find the therapist via the Internet, are new to therapy, and have unrealistic expectations. Let me explain:

Jonathan, a marriage and family therapist, says, "Most of the couples I see find me on the Psychology Today listing service. They call and immediately ask how many sessions it will take to fix their marriage. I try to explain that we have to see how it goes, but they are impatient. They have no idea that therapy is a relationship that takes time."

Sue, a clinical social worker, echoes this. "I am sensing a pattern with new clients. The first thing they want to do is negotiate the fee. They want to negotiate the times I can see them. They think that everything is negotiable. They don't see the big picture, how therapy can change their lives in major ways. They focus on the details. It's discouraging."

Helen, a senior family therapist, agrees. "New clients don't understand the process of therapy. For example, sometimes emotional issues surface at the end of a session. It's going to be messy sometimes. But these days, a new client, maybe a father, will say, 'I am out of here. If I wanted to argue with my family I could've stayed home.' They expect every session will end with happy faces. They don't get it."

Jonathan, Sue, and Helen are distressed about connecting with a more demanding kind of client, one who wants a timeline of when therapy will be done, or expects to negotiate policies and fees, or gets impatient about the lack of immediate progress. Instead of being grateful to book a session, these clients are challenging to the traditional process of finding a therapist and getting started in therapy. Sue goes so far as to call these clients her "anti-therapy" therapy clients. What is really going on?

The Rise of the EC

As I hear these stories and others, I think it does point to a trend and a new type of therapy client, one with specific behaviors in the way he or she wants to purchase therapy services. I have started to call this client the "Educated Consumer" or EC for short.

I first heard this term, EC, from a discount clothing store owner in the 1970s. Sy Syms advertised that, "An educated consumer is our best customer." He meant to suggest that an educated, sophisticated consumer who understood fashion and discount pricing would like his stores.

But the ECs that therapists are encountering right now are not sophisticated about the profession of therapy; instead, they are people who profess a savvy about purchasing. These purchasing-savvy clients have eliminated the traditional middle man for finding a therapist. They probably found you on their own, via the Internet. They may treat you, the therapist, with the rigor that they use for all their purchasing; they see nothing wrong with trying to negotiate fees and policies or voicing their own expectations of treatment. They often want clear and concise explanations up front about what you do, specifically and how long it takes.

Here is the problem: Therapy is an “invisible” service. Our methods are difficult to describe and quantify, and we can’t and don’t promise outcomes within a specific timeline. No wonder confusion and irritation can surface in the initial interactions between an EC and a therapist.

Here is my advice. To engage with an EC or any difficult client, it helps to learn to do 3 things:
1) Connect: Help clients understand the service on their terms.
2) Convince: Focus on client goals and values in every session.
3) Retain: Encourage clients to complete their work and see a return on their investment.

Let me explain further how to use these three strategies:

1) Connect

ECs can be a challenge to a therapist because they want to feel in control of what they are purchasing. This is normal and natural, and most of us have, at some point, wanted similar control. These clients need to understand what you are offering: what to expect, how long it will take, what it will feel like, how it really works, and what is happening each time. This is a normal expectation of purchasing.

To connect, you have to be prepared to answer these questions openly and clearly. You need to make therapy understandable to this savvy purchaser. Jonathan, the couples therapist, had trouble explaining his methods to new clients. The conversation quickly went to specifics including “how long will it take?”

The solution we devised was to design a better contract that used “packaging” — a way to present his services in a familiar format. Let me explain it further, in detail, so you can see how to use this too.

At my request, Jonathan first researched how long he normally worked with an average couple – six months – and then divided the time into thirds to create a package of 3 stages, each lasting two months, and he gave a name and purpose to each phase. When the next new couple called, Jonathan was ready. “When we start to work together, the first two months of weekly sessions will be your Relationship Review,” Jonathan said, adding what they could expect during this assessment phase and how it would help them over the short term to find the strengths of their relationship.

“The next two month phase is Working Through where together, we will sort through the details of problems; and the third and final phase is Consolidation– you will refine the skills needed to keep the relationship strong. Six months for a full program of review, problem solving and skill building.”

If couples needed more sessions or time, Jonathan re-contracted with them for a longer period of one of the three phases. With this contract in place, Jonathan found it much easier to engage new couples and help them connect to him and to his process of therapy. Instead of fearing the inevitable questions these ECs posed, Jonathan was happy and ready to explain.

Tips on Connecting: Offer a written or verbal contract that simplifies the process. Keep it similar to other similar services. Find easy-to-understand metaphors or analogies to help a client have a frame of reference. During a recent workshop I gave, therapists offered a wealth of metaphors that can work well (based on sports, hiking, traveling, etc.) and we role-played how to build on these metaphors over time, to help the EC understand the process of therapy and where they are in that process, at any given session.

2) Convince

It's hard to sell an EC on the value of therapy if the therapist can't articulate it herself. Many therapists try to highlight the value of their methods to clients using technical terms (think attachment or trauma reduction) but the EC appreciates non-jargon language.

Sue, the clinical social worker who was weary of negotiating with new clients, decided to help them get on board by focusing on the value of her services, starting with the first session and then continuing the value conversation throughout treatment.

I asked Sue to shift the structure of her sessions to leave ten minutes of time at the end of each session for a value-based review. During the review, she first asked a client to share what he or she thought was of value in the session. If a client had a difficult time identifying this, Sue came forward with her own observations, such as, "When you talked about your mother, you started to tear up. I know you said you don't express affection easily, but you showed some in here! That is progress and it moves us one step closer to your goal of communicating your feelings to others." In this way, Sue offered her own immediate validation about progress. The client felt seen and "held" and could walk away with reinforcement about the value of the session, helping to make the effort and expense of therapy worthwhile.

Tips on Convincing: Many therapists observe progress, but save their observations for their notes. ECs appreciate immediate feedback about what worked well. Practice voicing what you see that signals movement. Tie it to the client's goals. Validate large and subtle steps forward.

3) Retain

Part of our role as therapists is to encourage clients to stay in therapy long enough to complete their work. It is hard on the therapist to watch treatment be cut short, because we want our clients to heal, but also because sessions represent our income. For this reason, talking about retention can be a tricky issue for some therapists. With the EC, retention is an important factor in the purchasing process: they want to understand how to get their money's worth and that means a therapist must explain the concept of sticking with treatment for a certain amount of time, even when it feels uncomfortable.

A stockbroker might talk with a new investor about the need to plan to stay in the market despite inevitable ups and downs, long enough to see a profit. A gardener might talk with a child about the need to keep plants in the ground and watered through a long growing cycle, to be patient and let the plants bear fruit. But how does a therapist start this conversation?

Helen, the family therapist, was concerned about the father who wanted results and seemed ready to bolt. "Helen, can you give the father a clear and concrete reason to stay, one that would be more important than his reason to leave?" I asked.

Helen started the next session saying that she knew that therapy was an effort and an expense. The Dad chimed in immediately. "It has cost me three hundred and twenty dollars, four afternoons leaving work early, and I have to listen to my wife at home telling me over and over again what you said."

Some therapists might have been intimidated by this, but because Helen and I had been discussing ECs and their purchasing patterns, she simply said, "I know, this is really costing a lot and its hard. So I want to be straight with you. I think you and your family will need to see me for two more months. What would make it worth your while to stay?"

"I need to know that it is working," he said. Again, Helen immediately validated this need and together they set up specific markers to help him feel assured that it was moving forward. At the end of the session, Helen left time for the values-based review. Dad said that the most important part of the session for him was that Helen wanted to make sure he was getting his money's worth. He appreciated her being straight with him. Helen used the markers of change each time, with each successive session. With this approach, the Dad became a motivating force for the continued sessions.

<u>Tips on Retaining</u>: Link each session from one to the next with a review of goals, progress, and an overall vision of health or well-being. Give the EC ownership of process; be willing to share power and be transparent about the process of therapy to help the EC buy in.

I think that with the increase of the Internet in helping people find therapy services, we will see the rise of the Educated Consumer (EC.) With help, therapists can learn to attract and retain ECs more easily, using these and other strategies to adapt to a changing marketplace.

Bio: Lynn Grodzki, LCSW, MCC is one of the leading business coaches in the US for small business owners. She specializes in working with change-agents: therapists, coaches, healers, and other service-oriented consultants who help others make change in their lives. She is the author of five books about practice-building for therapists, coaches, and consultants, all published by W.W. Norton. Her articles on practice-building appear in national magazines such as the Psychotherapy Networker and Social Work Today. She presents workshops internationally and writes a monthly email newsletter that is read by over 9000 subscribers. Through her workshops and writing, she has become a pioneer in the field of practice-building, helping non-business-oriented professionals develop their private practices. With Lynn's guidance, thousands of professionals now operate small businesses that offer them a high degree of integrity as well *as enhanced financial success. To reach her, visit her website at: www.privatepracticesuccess.com*