

SFBT and Getting Really, Really Angry

When your client's best hope is to change the world

When you want to change the world

And so it's **FRUSTRATING**

A little about
the context
for the work I
am going to
talk about
today

- Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) is the sixth largest public (state supported) school system in the United States, the second largest in the state of Florida and the largest fully accredited K-12 and adult school district in the nation. BCPS has over 260,000 students and approximately 175,000 adult students in 229 schools and education centers and 95 charter schools. Students are from 204 different countries and speak 130 languages.
- AND in 2013 this school district was in trouble

The dilemma – school to prison pipeline

- African-American students make up 40 percent of the Broward county school district's student population
- But they were making up 66 percent of the suspensions
- And 71 percent of the arrests
- In Florida overall, 26,000 children under 18 were arrested at their school last year
- Children who have once been arrested are significantly more likely to drop out of school (see UFT report)
- Threatened lawsuits from NAACP and parents

Instead:

- On November 5th, 2013, the NAACP (national and state representatives), the Broward County State Attorney's Office, the Broward Sheriff's Office, Broward Public Defenders, and the Broward School District signed a historic agreement, the PROMISE Program
- First offense suspensions will be handled with in school detention (if minor) or referred to the PROMISE program (if major)
- At the PROMISE program, suspended students will receive academic help, mentoring, AND
- A solution focused assessment by NSU MFT interns
- This assessment to result in recommendations to the child, parent, and home school

Why on earth
go with a
department
of family
therapy?

- Our interns had been in the schools and principals reported we did “different” things that somehow worked
- We had an “evidence based” approach (thanks to Insoo, Johnny Kim, and Cynthia Franklin!)
- We were free - important for a financially strapped school district

How is it working?

- Recidivism is down from 50 percent to 8 percent (3 percent for bilingual)
- Arrest rates dropped dramatically - no longer an issue, among lowest in Florida
- Identified as national model by Obama administration
- BUT anger swirling around issues of race, class, culture, gender, and what do we mean by "safe" - always an issue with this program for clients, for us, for school officials, and for community



The
PROMISE
program –
Preventing
Recidivism
through
Opportunities
, Mentoring,
Interventions,
Support and
Education

Let's get you oriented:

- Divide up into teams of two - person A and person B
- Person A, listen to what I am going to tell you to do to make sure person B is safe
- Now person B - how do you feel about telling another one of those A's your life story?

What we do that works and is SFBT

- Ask about student's own goal
- Take that seriously
- Identify exceptions and past steps towards that goal
- Listen and validate, but avoid undue problem focus

What we do
that not every
SFBT
therapist
might do

- When we hear about goals and get excited about them along with the student, we provide concrete resources the student COULD use to help towards that goal
- We do that to level the playing field - it's not so easy being a child in a world of adults and racism and oppression are in play as well
- AND we applaud anger
- Biba Rebolj - SFBT is about what is not just what if

EXAMPLE: Our poetry queen

- Queen (the pseudonym she chose) is a 15 year old high school student. When she moved to her current high school from out of state a year ago, she fell in with a group of other girls who seemed to her popular and competent. She pretty much did what they said and dressed how they said to dress. That was hard for her at times, as she likes writing poetry by herself and describes herself as “quite shy”. But she bought a blonde wig and started dressing “flashy”.
- Positive results (in her view): she attracted the attention of a high school senior young man who is now her boyfriend (or as she prefers, “boo”)
- Negative results: The other girls turned on her and began to make social media posts “who does she think she is” and to reject her

And then
things
escalated...

- Queen tried to talk with the other girls in a group chat about rejecting her, and how she still admired them and valued their friendship
- They responded in a hostile manner and told her she was too “weird” for them
- When she persisted in messaging them and asking if they couldn’t all still be friends, they threatened to beat her up if she didn’t leave them alone
- She got frightened and brought a pair of scissors to school in case she had to defend herself

And then
things
escalated
some more...

- The other girls reported to the school administration that she was “weird” and pursuing them
- She was searched and the scissors were found in her backpack
- She was suspended and a conference was held with her mother and school officials in which her mother was asked if Queen had showed sociopathic tendencies and if there was any possibility she was a potential school shooter
- She was sent to the special school where we work, and her wig removed in front of the other students so she could be searched for concealed weapons - she cried

And then she
had to see
us...

- We listened
- We focused on her creative writing and her goal of one day being a poet
- What we did that was traditionally solution focused:
 - Focus on her goal
 - Focus on past exceptions -when she won a poetry prize some years back, when her mother admired her poetry

What we did
that maybe
some
wouldn't ...

- We questioned “be less angry” as a goal - we asked her when and how her anger was useful to her
- When she said she would give anything not to have to go back to that school with those other girls and those administrators, we told her about other free public schools she could go to including an online school
- When she said she wanted to say her poetry out loud, we found her a list of free open mic nights
- These were not resources she or her single mother knew about
- We see ourselves as honoring the goal when we share resources
- And honoring the client when we honor their anger (grief, etc.) instead of trying to “fix” it or insisting on only “positive talk”.

So what did Queen do?

- She and her mother moved her to the online high school so she could graduate early, avoid drama, and start taking college courses
- She signed up for an open mic night and shared her poetry with her mother for the first time
- She wrote a poem for this conference, so we would know what helps with young people in situations like hers
- We are so grateful that she educated us!

Queen's Poem

This generation is a spiritual war zone, a tournament between
lust and identity

If my smile was as big as my hips, I would love myself more

I have to dress up as a doll for people to accept me, for me to
be noticed

If normal is the same as having the same opinions and ideas as
everyone else, I don't want to be normal

Every day I have a different personality, I try a different identity

Change is inevitable

“Shame on you for changing”

No, shame on you for staying the same

Writing poetry is the part of me that doesn't change - that's my
true identity.

You saw that. Keep on seeing that.

The Burger King Wars

- Brenda (not her real name) also educated us
- Brenda had ongoing conflict for years with another girl over a boyfriend neither wanted any more
- Brenda lives in foster care and has few adult role models
- She had been placed in numerous "anger management" groups without success
- She was facing expulsion and arrest
- The conflict took place at school AND at a chain fast food restaurant (Burger King) where both girls worked

What did we do that was different?

- We embraced her continuing anger as she did - as part of her determination not to be a victim (very important to her)
- Once she relaxed and realized we weren't going to try to "take her anger away", we talked about the rest of her life
- She turned out to have a strong interest in nursing and a desire to one day be "a lady in a white uniform" respected by all, as she had seen when she was being treated at the school clinic
- She liked the school nurse



SO we helped her create
a revenge fantasy...

•What if:

- She got into a nursing training program we helped her find out about
- She graduated and did well
- She was able to afford a down payment on a car
- She got a really nice car and
- Drove BACK to the Burger King, where her nemesis would
- still be working, and haughtily ordered fries
- That plan is now in operation and Brenda is both happy
- and staying out of trouble

Deeply
serious
grounds for
anger (and
grief and
trauma)

- Miguel lost his brother to gang violence in El Salvador
- He came to the United States for refuge with his father -having to leave his mother behind with other family members
- His asylum case dragged on and he felt lonely, isolated and angry
- He made himself feel better smoking marijuana
- Then he faced deportation for that along with his father - deportation meant certain death
- OF COURSE he was angry with the system - so were we

What helped?

- Validating his understandable anger
- Joining with him in collective action
- Finding supportive resources for him
- And building on the exceptions - that there are always kind people out there, that he was loved by his parents and we cared about him as well
- I can't say where he is for legal reasons but he and his father are safe and he is no longer smoking, but instead working hard to help other asylum seekers.

What about the therapist's own anger?

- After Parkland school shooting in 2018, right wing media attacked the PROMISE program
- School shooter was not the person for whom the program was designed - like all school shooters to date, he was an affluent white male - and he never attended the PROMISE program
- Yet the program was attacked for “coddling criminals” and nearly shut down
- School officials who had supported the program and me personally received death threats and I was cautioned against speaking out to support the program

What worked?

- Speaking out
- Remembering it is a sign you are making a difference when those who don't like your clients attack you (thank you Bekka Ouer and Dallas Rainbow Counseling!)
- Holding on to the exceptions
 - The children we had been able to help
 - The teachers and school officials who support what we are doing
 - The devoted interns who work in the program
 - That they cannot stop us working even if they stop one program

Ultimate outcome: the conservative governor's School Safety Commission concluded PROMISE actually makes schools safer and we were vindicated

Ideas for us as therapists:

- Respect for our clients is deserved and powerful at the same time
- It helps to respect the anger and other “negative” emotions as well
- And it helps to honor your own feelings

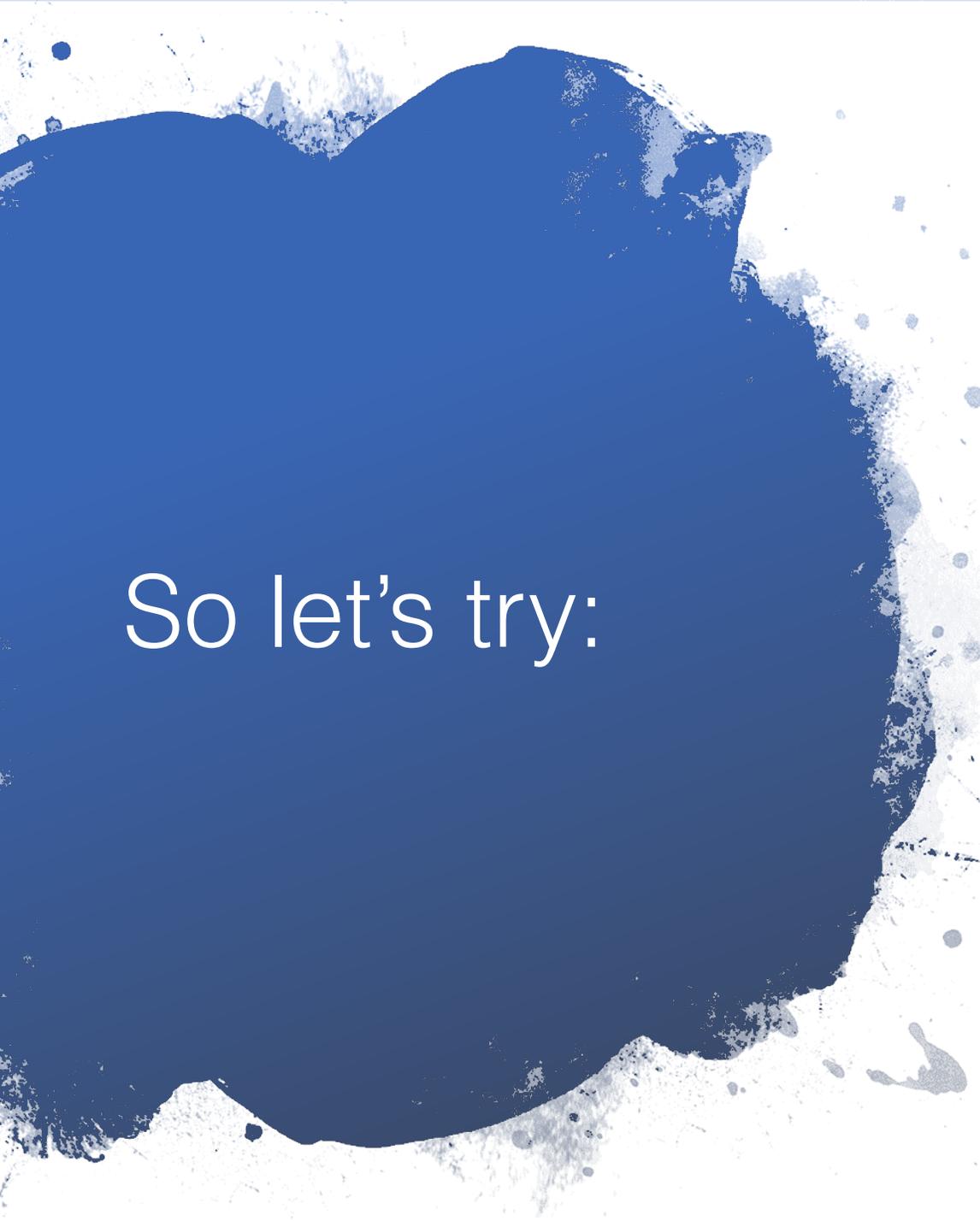
What if we saw anger simply as energy?



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So let's try:

- What has made you really angry recently?
- What have you tried to try to make that emotion go away or to distract from it or distance yourself from the feeling?
- What have you tried that embraces the anger?
- What could you do going forward that from here to more greatly value your own anger and your client's?