

# Ten progress focused interventions

## **Intervention 1. First acknowledge, then activate**

In a progress focused interaction, the coach always acknowledges the client's perspective before anything else. The feeling of being respected and having your perspective acknowledged, is a prerequisite for progress. When the client feels understood and feels his perspective is being respected, he opens up. This is known as the principle of reciprocity: people have a tendency to give back what they receive. When they receive a criticism, they are like responding negatively. When they receive respect and acknowledgement, they feel like giving back exactly that. After acknowledging the client's perspective, the coach asks a question in the right direction. Since the client feels respected, he is more likely to take this question into account and to think about his answer. That's what is needed, since progress focused questions often take some pondering. The questions are not that simple to answer. So: first join, then activate, first acknowledge, then ask a progress focused question. How does the progress focused coach acknowledge the client's perspective? There are several ways in which he can do this.

The first is by summarising the client's perspective, using the same key words as the client did. Language matching. When people have finished their last sentence, they often think about what they have just said. When, in that time, they hear their key words repeated, they are encouraged to think on along similar lines. When, in that time, they hear the perspective or the judgment of the coach, their focus of attention shifts. They get distracted from their own line of thought, which is not what we want in progress focused coaching. That's why progress focused coaches listen closely to the client, in order to be able to summarise the client's perspective using the client's key words. The summary starts something like this: "Ah, so the situation is that....(client's key words)" or "So if I understand things correctly.... (client's key words).

The second way to acknowledge the client's perspective is through shorter sentences, like "That must be hard..." or "I can understand you wish to change this situation..." or "Sounds logical, tell me a bit more if you please...?"

## **Intervention 2. Usefulness interventions**

Progress focused conversations are goal directed conversations. That's why the usefulness of what's being said and talked about is a constant point of attention. The usefulness questions (Schlundt Bodien, 2005; Visser, 2005) can be used at the start of the conversation, in the middle and at the end.

Usefulness question focusing on the topic of conversation:

- what would be useful for you to talk about today?
- how can we use our time together as usefully as possible?
- what would you like to talk about, so that this conversation is useful to you?

Usefulness question focusing on the desired outcomes:

- how would you notice afterwards that this conversation has been useful to you?
- how would you notice tomorrow that today has been worth your while?
- suppose this conversation is beneficial to you, what would be better then?

Usefulness question during the conversation:

- is this being useful to you?
- if so, what is useful to you?
- if not, how can we make this conversation more useful to you?

Usefulness question at the end of the conversation

- has this conversation been useful to you?
- if so, what was most useful?
- how is it useful to you?

### **Intervention 3. How does it bother you?**

When you are experiencing difficulties, you may feel quite powerless to do something about it. Clearly, if you knew what to do to fix a problem, you wouldn't need to talk to a coach about it. When the client talks about his problem, his perspective will often be that this problem is happening to him and there is not much he can do to solve it. So we need ways in which we can feel in control of both the problem and the way to make progress. The "how does it bother you"-question (Walter and Peller, 1992) is helpful to achieve this. It is part of the problem acknowledgement phase in a progress focused conversation. Problem acknowledgement implies that the WHAT and the HOW of the problem is explored (without elaborating the why of the problem). Progress focused coaches focus on two aspects of the problematic situation: what is the problem and how is this a problem to the client. If the problem is that the client is losing his job, the "how does this bother you"-question may result in answers as varied as: "I don't know how to find a new job" or "I feel desperate and don't feel like getting up in the morning". When it is clear how a problem is bothering the client, the focus of the client's desired situation also becomes a little clearer.

### **Intervention 4. normalising**

When people are experiencing a problem, they often feel there is something wrong with them. They have this problem and on top of that they think their problem is weird. A sign of a mental illness. A sign of weakness. This basically leads them to have two problems instead of one. The "surplus'-problem can be made a bit less hard when the problem is normalised. Normalising (O'Hanlon, Weiner-Davis, 1989) means that you treat the problem as a normal thing, not as a sign of something else that's broken. The progress focused coach can use indirect normalising statements, like "sounds familiar" or "lots of people encounter this sort of thing in their lives". He can also use direct normalising statements, which reframe the negative situation into something positive. If, for example, two colleagues have difficulties working together after having had big troubles in their project, the coach can normalise by saying: "Often, when people experience setbacks in a project, this puts a temporary strain on their working relationship...it's therefore understandable that the two of you are looking for the right way forward from here....I have noticed that you already communicate honestly and openly about your ideas...how have you managed to achieve this open communication?"

### **Intervention 5. Creating a positive expectation**

According to Steve de Shazer (1988), creating the expectation that a positive change is about to happen, may be the most important therapeutic intervention. Hope is an optimistic expectation of a better future. Research shows that when first year students attribute their bad study results to temporary factors combined with a positive expectation that their results will improve in the near future, this lead to dramatically improved long term academic success (Wilson et al, 2002). In a progress focused coaching conversation, normalising and creating a positive expectation are often combined. Like this, for example: "Most first year students have to get used to their new life at University and find the academic demands challenging at first...We see that students who want to catch up quite often succeed to do so after the first half semester and also to catch up with the subjects of the second half semester.

They are especially successful when they are aware that it helps a great deal to obtain EC's when they keep on track with the great amount of study matter..”

- when the problem is solved, what would you notice to be better?
- what will it look like, when things are better?
- what is the first small sign that will tell you things are getting better?

### **Intervention 6. Reframing**

Reframing (Kim Berg, 1994) means that you subtly suggest a more constructive perspective. When the client says: “Things will never get any better for me...”, the reframe could sound like this: “I can surely understand that you say that right now and that you’re wondering how you can make things a little better...” When the client says: “He is never on time for our meetings!”, the reframe may sound like this: “You find it really important that he is on time for your meetings?” When the client says: “I have no idea what could make this conversation useful to me...”, the reframe could sound like this: “You have no idea yet what you would like to talk about so that this conversation is useful to you...”.

### **Intervention 7. Direct and indirect process compliments**

Carol Dweck's growth mindset research shows that process compliments stimulate a growth mindset whereas compliments that focus on the person stimulate a fixed mindset ('you are very intelligent' or 'you are a brilliant student'). Compliments that create a growth mindset focus on the effort the person made, their strategy, their perseverance, their learning, their behaviour. Those sorts of compliments focus on what the person did that works well.

Direct process compliments are:

- you must have tried really hard
- your approach worked really well
- I'm impressed with how you managed to achieve these good results

Indirect process compliments are:

- how did you manage to achieve such good results?
- what did you do that worked well?
- how did you do that?

### **Intervention 8. Redirecting**

People often are perfectly capable of explaining what they *don't* want, but find it harder to express what they *do* want. The progress focused coach acknowledges this and redirects the negative statements into positive ones. For example:

- I understand you don't want this any longer....what do you want instead?
- Understandable that this bothers you...how do you want things to become?
- Of course you don't want that....what do you want instead?

You could see this process of redirecting as a process in which the 'minuses' that bother the client are transformed into 'pluses' that the client wants.

### **Intervention 9. Positive behaviour descriptions**

How can you tell whether you have asked enough questions to help the client make progress? The answer is: when your client answers in terms of his own positive behaviour, in the past, the present and the desired future. When people visualise their own positive behaviour, that behaviour feels familiar and achievable. When something feels nearby and achievable, people

are more willing to actually do it. They become more autonomously motivated to act. Questions that help the client to answer in terms of his own positive behaviour are:

- Suppose the problem is solved, what can you do differently then?
- How would you notice you are making progress? What do you do then?
- Suppose you will notice things are better next week, what would you do differently then?
- Suppose Peter will be on time for your meetings, what would you then be able to do differently?
- What will you be able to do, when things are the way you want them to become?

### **Intervention 10. Implementation intentions**

An implementation intention is a construct of ‘if, then’: If I am in situation X, then I will perform goal directed behavior Y. To illustrate, when formulating an implementation intention to support the intention to increase one’s fruit intake, a specific situation that is a good opportunity to act on this intention is identified (e.g., “riding the bus home after work”) and then linked to a specific goal-directed action (e.g., “eating an apple”) in the if–then plan, resulting in the following implementation intention: “If I am riding the bus home after work, then I will eat an apple.” Planning one’s goal striving in this manner is helpful for two reasons. First, by specifying a situation for enacting one’s intentions in advance, the mental representation of this critical situation is highly accessible in memory and therefore more easily detected as a good opportunity to act on one’s intentions. Second, by linking this critical situation to a specific goal-directed behavior in an if–then structure, the control of the behavior is delegated from the self to the specified situational cue, resulting in automatic elicitation of this goal directed behavior when the situation is encountered (Adriaanse et al, 2011). The progress focused coach can help the client formulate an implementation intention by asking questions like:

- If you feel criticised, how will you respond constructively?
- If you need to concentrate, where will you go study?
- If you feel the urge to eat crisps, what will you eat instead that’s healthy?

# Checklist

## Start and usefulness

- What made you decide to come here today?
- Despite xxx, what made you decide to still come here today?
- What would you like to discuss to make this conversation useful for you?
- How can we use this time as usefully as possible?
- How would you like to kick this off today?
- What would be a good way for you to start this?
- What would be useful for you to discuss?
- How would you notice this conversation had been useful to you?
- What brings you here today?
- What would you like to talk about today?
- With what topics have you come here today?
- What has to happen here today to make it worthwhile?
- What has to happen here today for you to decide it has been worthwhile coming?
- What would make this conversation worthwhile for you?
- How will you know tomorrow that this conversation had been useful to you?
- Suppose this conversation is beneficial, what would be better?
- How would you like to kick this off today?
- What are you finding useful (in this conversation)?
- What has been most useful to you so far?
- How can we make the rest of this conversation as useful as possible?
- How would you like to use the rest of our time together in order for it to be useful to you?

## What has been achieved already

- What is going well?
- What went well the last few weeks?
- What is going better? What is better?
- What have you already achieved?
- What are you happy with?
- What would you like to happen again?
- What do you appreciate in the current situation?
- How did you achieve this good result? How did you realise these achievements? How did you go about achieving these good results?
- How did you do that?
- How did you achieve that?
- What helped?
- How did that help?
- What have you learned? What did you learn from that?
- What do you want to keep on doing, because it works well for you?
- Which positive results have been achieved already?

## Continuation interventions

- What is going well? What is going well in your life?
- What do you want to keep the way it is?
- What *doesn't* have to change?
- What is going well enough?
- What *doesn't* need to change?
- What *don't* you want to change?
- What are you happy about?
- What has to stay the same?
- What has *definitely* got to stay the way it is now?
- What are you happy with already?

### **Normalising**

Yes, lots of students would say the same as you are saying now  
Yes, that is hard for most students  
Yes, many of the students would say that is difficult  
Yes, people usually need....that's very normal  
Yes, that's very understandable  
Yes, that's logical  
Of course you don't want that to happen

### **The optimism question**

What makes you optimistic that you can achieve the desired success?  
Which signs do you have that you can reach the desired situation?  
What gives you hope?  
What are you optimistic about?  
Which good reasons do you have to be optimistic?

### **Focus on what the student wants to change**

What is it that you would like to change?  
What do you want to be different? / What would you like to be different?  
What would you like to be improved?  
What do you want to talk about regarding this problem?  
What is the problem?  
How is it a problem to you?  
What is bothering you?  
How is it bothering you?  
How does it affect you?  
What is it that you would like to change?  
What do you want to be different? / What would you like to be different?

### **Clarifying and specifying the subject of change**

So, if I understand it correctly.... (summarising what the student said using his words)  
Sounds logical, will you tell me some more about that please?  
Could it be that.....? (perspective of the student)  
I am not quite sure...what do you think the most important aspect is for you....?  
Do you think that....  
You must have a good reason to....  
That sounds hard....  
I can understand you want to change that..../I can imagine you would like that to be different....

### **Exploring the desired success for the student**

What would you like to achieve?  
What would you want instead (of the problem)?  
How would you like things to be different?  
What do you want to be better?  
How do you like the situation to become?  
What would you like the result to be?  
What would you want the future situation to look like?  
What would the 10 on the scale look like?  
Suppose the problem is solved....what would be better then?  
What can you do when you have achieved that?  
What could you do when the problem was solved?

### **Exploring the desired success from a different perspective**

What would others say the desired future would look like?  
How would others notice that the problem is solved?  
How would others notice things are better?  
How would others want the future situation to look like?

What would others say the 10 on the scale would look like?

### **Clarifying the positive results/the benefits of the desired future**

What would be the difference?

How will that help?

What will be the benefit of that?

What will be better when you have achieved that?

What would be good about that?

How would that be an improvement to you?

How will that be helpful to you?

For whom will that be beneficial?

For whom is that an improvement?

How will you notice you have changed/done enough?

That sounds good!

Ah, I can imagine that's what you want to achieve!

### **Exploring the desired success from a different perspective**

What would it bring others?

How would it help others?

How would that improve things between you and xxx?

How would xxx notice things are better?

How would xxx notice the difference? How would he notice things are different/better?

What would it bring others?

**Scale of progress:** imagine a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is the situation as you would like it to be and 0 was when nothing had been achieved yet

### **Follow up interventions**

Where are you now on that scale?

Where are you already on that scale?

What makes it that number?

What tells you it is that number?

What is going well already?

How did you manage to get from 0 to where you are now?

What is the highest you have ever been on that scale?

When have you had a glimpse of the 10?

What would be different if you were one step up the scale?

How would you notice you were one step up the scale?

Which signs do you have that improvement is possible?

### **Scaling questions from a different perspective**

What would xxx say you are now in the scale?

What would xxx say you have achieved between 0 and now?

How would xxx say you have achieved this/done this/pulled this of?

What would xxx say that helped you to reach this point at the scale?

How could xxx see that you are one step higher on the scale?

### **Coping questions**

What keeps you going on in these difficult circumstances?

How do you deal with such difficult situations each day?

What helps you to hang in there?

How come you are doing so well given your difficult circumstances?

It is remarkable how you have been able to keep your work going in such hard times. How do you do that?

How did you cope before (the problem occurred)?

How did you manage to ..

What do others appreciate about how you cope with..../which compliments do your colleagues give you?

### **Exploring previous successes and positive exceptions**

When were things (a bit) better?  
When did things go better?  
When was the problem a bit less bad?  
When did the problem bother you a bit less?  
When were you a bit higher on the scale?  
What is the highest you have been on the scale?  
When have you experienced that you were able to.. ?  
When did you manage a bit better to...?  
In which situations have you managed to ...?  
Which other examples are there?  
What was different then? What was better then?  
What made that possible for you? How did that help you?  
What made that work well?  
What did you do to make that happen?  
What did you do that worked so well?  
Interesting... how did that help?  
You did well! You have done fine there!  
That worked well!  
How did you pull that off?

### **Exploring previous successes and positive exceptions from another perspective**

What would xxx say if I asked him when things were already a bit better?  
How would xxx have been able to notice things were a bit better then?  
Which situations would xxx mention that went better?  
What would xxx have noticed when things went better?  
How would xxx say that success happened?  
On which point of the scale would xxx say you were when things were better?

### **Defining one step forward**

Is it useful to talk about this?  
What was useful?  
What was specifically useful?  
Is this useful?  
How is it useful to you?  
Does this help?  
What helped?  
How can you use this?  
How is what we discussed useful in your current situation?  
How is this relevant to you?  
How is this relevant in view of what you want to achieve?  
What ideas do you come up with which will take you one step forward?  
How can you make this happen again? / How can you repeat this?  
How could this happen again?  
What would be the first sign that would tell you that you are moving in the right direction?  
How can you expand what works well?  
Who can help you best to take the next step?  
Which small step could you take tomorrow?  
What is your next step?  
How could you take the next step?  
What would one point up the scale look like? What would you do different?  
It sounds like a good idea to try that.

### **One step forward from another perspective**

Who would notice your step first?

Who would notice your success first?  
What would xxx say one step forward would look like?

### **Attending to success**

May I suggest something to you? Could you over the next few weeks pay special attention to the moments that things are a bit better and make a note of what is different then?  
Could you pay attention to the moments that you are one step higher on the scale and see what is better then?  
Could you please observe over the next few weeks when the situation is already a little bit like you want it to be? What made that happen?  
Could you think about when the problem is bothering you a bit less and what is better for you then?  
Would you please think about how you manage to achieve xxx?

### **Suggestion to take a next step**

Would it be a good idea to do xxx again?  
Would you find it a good idea to try to take the next step?  
It sounds as if xxx worked well for you. Would it be good to do it again?  
Could you try to do xxx again and see what happens?

### **Monitoring progress/second session**

What is better?  
Are there small signs of improvement?  
What would you like to do more of?  
What is going well?  
What are you pleased about?  
What are you relatively happy about?  
How come it is not worse?  
What is going better?  
Which results have been achieved?  
What has been achieved?  
How did you achieve that?  
How did you manage to achieve that?  
What else helped?  
What did you do to make that happen?  
How did that help?  
How did you pull that off?  
What else is better? What else? And what else? Etc

### **Is there a further desire for change?**

What else could be useful to talk about?  
Have we discussed things sufficiently?  
Is there anything else you would like to address?  
Is there something else you would like to change?  
What else would you want to be different?  
What would you now like to achieve?  
What does further improvement look like?  
What more would you like to achieve?

### **Maintaining what has been achieved**

How would you know you have achieved enough?  
How will you maintain the improvements?  
How would you notice that you are maintaining what you have achieved?  
How would you notice that what you have achieved is maintained?  
What can you do if things should go bad?  
What advice can you give yourself for when things are temporarily not so good

## **Directing interventions**

### **Preparation**

#### *Focus on the topic*

The reason why I have made this appointment with you is .....

The goal is...

The purpose of this conversation is...

What you need to achieve is...

What I would like to talk to you about is .....

The goals of this meeting is

The purpose of this meeting is to .....

I would like to talk to you about .....

#### *Focusing on what works*

What do I appreciate about this student?

What do I like about how the student works?

What is going well with this student?

Which signs do I notice that tell me this student is able to improve?

What gives hope?

#### *Directing questions: what you expect from the student*

How can you ensure that....?

What would you be able to do to ensure that ....?

What ideas have you got regarding how xxx can be achieved?

How could you contribute to xxx being achieved?

Have you got any ideas at this point as to how xxx can be achieved?

How can you achieve that ....?

#### *Which positive results you want to achieve*

So that.....(xxx will be achieved)

The reason why I ask you to do this is.....

What will be better than is....

The benefit of that would be that .....

That would help to.....

## **Directing interventions in response to a visitor typical reaction from the student**

#### *Understanding and acknowledging*

I understand that...

Yes, many students say that....

It is logical that you say that

So you think that..../so your opinion is.....

#### *Repeating the expectations and the positive results*

It is important that you..... so that.....

So how can you ensure that....so that...?

## **Directing interventions in response to a complainer typical reaction from the student**

#### *Understanding and acknowledging*

So you find it hard to....

That sounds hard...

I appreciate that...

Good to hear that you still do xxxx, under these difficult circumstances

#### *Repeating the expectations and the positive results*

Given that this situation is hard for you...  
How can you ensure that...so that...?  
How have you solved similar problems in the past?  
What did you do then? What worked well for you then?

Good to hear you are going to achieve...  
That's a good starting point  
What do we agree on?  
What are you going to achieve?  
How are you going to achieve that?  
How can I help you?  
See for further helping interventions above

### **Directing when the student is doing well**

#### *Directing sentences*

I have noticed that xxx is going well  
What is going really well is.....  
I noticed that you have done xxx really well....  
I notice that xxx works really well for you....  
I am pleased with the good results you have achieved regarding.....  
I would like to make more/better use your experience ...  
I would like to also use your contribution with regard to .....

What do you regard as your next step?  
Which challenge would you like to have now?

#### *Preparation*

What do I appreciate about this student?  
What is going well regarding this student?  
What would I like to achieve with this student?  
When did the desired situation already occur with this student?  
Which genuine compliments do I have for this student?

#### *Your expectations*

What ideas have you got regarding your next step.....  
How do you think you can best take your next step regarding.....  
What would you be willing to contribute regarding....  
How could you make your knowledge useful to achieve .....

How would you notice you are getting better at.....  
I would like you to start with xxx....  
I would like to work with you on....What are your thoughts about that?  
I would like you to achieve....what are your ideas about that?

#### *The good reasons why you are expecting this*

So that.....(xxx will be achieved)  
The reason why I ask you to do this is.....  
What will be better then is....  
The benefit of that would be that .....

That would help to.....  
That way you could realise xxx