What Is Clean Language and Why Is It Important?

Andrew's summary

Clean Language aka Symbolic Modelling is a psychotherapy technique that is very effective in helping a client to work through times of trauma or difficulty and find their own peace, healing and way forward through or around blocks and barriers. It also provides safeguards against a therapist asking leading questions or seeming to guide the client's responses. It was not designed for people who live with communication disabilities or use AAC but we have found it a remarkable tool for facilitating self-expression and overcoming anxiety and being stuck. For "client" I prefer to use "communicator".

I was introduced to the ideas and practice of Clean Language by my longtime tutor Lea who is a searcher for meaning in good lives. At a course in Austin Texas in early 2013, she learned that Clean Language was developed by a psychologist from New Zealand named David Grove (1950-2008). As I was born in NZ, I found it interesting that he was part-Maori. Grove spent much of his career working with patients who had experienced trauma. When talking with his clients, he noticed that the events of the trauma were so difficult and painful to explain and that it was sometimes easier for his clients to communicate using metaphors. Metaphors brought up an accurate description of the emotions behind the trauma. By working through their trauma using their own personal metaphors, clients were able to find peace and healing.

Grove thought of metaphors as a bridge between the conscious and unconscious minds. Our unconscious mind uses symbols that represent specific meanings. When we dream, we experience our unconscious mind communicating to us through symbols. Using our conscious mind, we can bring up these symbols to help us to understand ourselves and the way we are in the world.

Grove wanted to learn how to better serve his clients by being as "clean" as possible. This meant that he did not want in any way to influence his clients. Apparently, he was guided in developing clean language by a tree that he sat underneath while trying to come up with a "clean" system. I like that story very much as I love trees! http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/Grove-interview-questions-1996.pdf

Being "clean" means helping the client to develop their "metaphorical landscape" with minimal interference from the facilitator. This means the facilitator will communicate using very few words. Grove (and the tree) came up with nine "clean questions" that are both strategically and intuitively used by the facilitator to help the client understand their inner world that so greatly affects their outer world.

Being "clean" means not adding your own words, thoughts, perceptions, advice or judgements into the client's space. Doing so could hinder real lasting change because the client already has all the tools they need to find peace and solutions within themselves. The client just needs time and support to get to know their landscape.

Because we are all unique, we all perceive and experience the world differently. Nobody can truly know what and how we think, so it is unlikely that others really know what our "problem" is or what's best for us. We, ourselves, are the better judge of that.

Two students of Grove, Penny Tompkins and James Lawley, made careful notes of his techniques. It took them seven years to write a book called ***Metaphors in Mind: transformation through symbolic modelling*** (2000). They led the course in Austin that Lea attended. She told me how, using metaphors, she was able to see what was blocking her from moving ahead with her dream. "When I was asked the clean questions, I better understood what kind of steps I needed to take and also what was in between me and those steps. Once I understood what was stopping my unconscious mind from wanting to take those steps, the clean questions helped me to communicate with my own unconscious mind [and] come up with resource symbols to move me closer to my goals."

Lea rightly imagined that Clean Language could also help me to understand things that might be blocking me or causing anxiety. I already used my own metaphors a lot in composing poetry and imagining paintings. Clean Language has helped me to confront and overcome some barriers in my path. That is very good by itself. But some other factors are

just as important. Using only a small number of "clean" questions is a way of ensuring that I am expressing my own thoughts and images and not influenced by leading questions from my therapists or facilitators. Most of their questions reflect back to me words and images I have used. If I do not answer right away, they wait quietly without jumping in to rephrase the questions. The words and metaphors I use are clearly mine. I hope that this evidence will help to convince people in authority that I am the author of my words and choices and that I should be listened to and believed.

When I first tried Clean Language, I remarked: *It is a unique way to see my world sometimes. I want to laugh. My time with Lea is like picking the shell off a nut. I pick away at the words so I and others understand what I mean. You don't always understand what you hear and repeat it without a lot of thought. Clean Language helps it to make sense. I like to use the idea of a picture in my mind so you can see it when you hear the words. It uses the picture to tell a story. It is good to find out more about what I am thinking. You would think we would know ourselves the best but we need to uncover our words and reveal them in their nakedness. It is being honest with yourself.*

I am sure that Clean Language could help anyone who experiences anxiety and doubt and may lack confidence. We have found it can be combined very well with Supported Typing/Facilitated Communication. But, as Lea would emphasize, it was not designed for use with ST or for people like us who type to talk. I wish more Canadians could become expert in the use of Clean Language, especially by people who type or use other forms of AAC. Please help, Bridges allies and friends!

Here are links to the records of three of my sessions, to show how Clean Language can help. In these sessions, we need both the ST facilitator (Judi) and the Clean Language therapist (Lea) as well as a calm environment and no time pressure. Judi was providing physical and emotional support to me as I thought and typed on my computer. Lea was recording her questions and my responses in a table format on her laptop.

- Desired Outcome: To Be A Better Runner. Andrew supported by Judi in conversation with Lea, 2 Feb 2013
  http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/AB-CL-running-20130202.pdf

- Desired Outcome: I would like to be able to get myself started without the help of others. Andrew supported by Judi in conversation with Lea, 16 Nov and 7 Dec 2013
  http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/Rhythm-Life-AB-CL-2013-Nov-Dec.pdf

- Desired Outcome: I Want to Talk about the Changes I must face in future. Andrew supported by Judi in conversation with Lea, 13 & 20 Sep 2014. The therapist only echoes or reflects back the words and phrases that are initiated by the focus person/communicator. Andrew felt able to face change as a result.
  http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/Changes-CL-20140920.pdf

Resources on Clean Language/Symbolic Modelling

Books, Websites and Courses:
- James Lawley and Penny Tompkins, ***Metaphors in Mind: transformation through symbolic modelling*** (2000). ISBN-13: 978-0953875108.
- Wendy Sullivan and Judy Rees, ***Clean Language: revealing metaphors and opening minds*** (2008) ISBN-13: 978-1845901257
- Interview with David Grove (1996): http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/37/1/And-what-kind-of-a-man-is-David-Grove/Page1.html Brief summary: http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/Grove-interview-questions-1996.pdf
- http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/ The Clean Collection.
- http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/pages/Clean-Language-Training.html
- http://cleanlanguagetraining.com/cc2018/
- https://cleanlearning.co.uk/blog/discuss/10-ways-to-get-started-with-clean-language
- Online Clean Language and Symbolic Modelling https://cleanlanguageonline.com/
- Sharon Small is a Clean Language trainer and assessor based out of California, and offers courses at Clean Language Institute, 115 Nelson Street Arroyo Grande, CA 93420 cleancoach@icloud.com