



## Clear Thinking Issue 104

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## How to be a kind task master

*3 ways to set tasks so your clients will do them – by **Mark Tyrrell***

The benefits of exercise and good nutrition only appear *after* the gym session or the healthy meal(s), and likewise the ripple effects of psychotherapy should show up in the client's real life – that is outside your therapy room. Sometimes we need to facilitate this by getting our clients to actually do stuff... in the real world.

Years ago a young woman came to see me. She was suffering from extreme self consciousness, convinced that 'everybody' was always looking at her and thinking her 'an idiot'.

"What's your biggest fear?" I said to her.

"It sounds so silly, but I'm terrified of tripping and falling flat on my face, so that everybody thinks I'm a complete fool!"

"Has this ever actually happened?"

“No... but I keep feeling as if it might!”

Toward the end of her first session I put this proposal to her.

“I’ve been wondering how we can find out whether or not you are right about how people would react if they saw you fall over. Now you might think I’m a bit crazy here, but I’ve got an idea. I’d like you to carry out a little experiment. This experiment will establish beyond doubt whether you are right and also help you in all kinds of other ways you don’t know about yet.”

“I’d like you to go down to your local shopping mall and *deliberately* fall over, right there in public...”

She agreed to this (we’ll come back to that) and I knew she’d be as good as her word.

The following week she came in with a noticeably more confident air.

“Well, how was your ‘trip’?” I asked.

“You won’t believe this! I walked up and down the mall for half an hour, screwing up my courage, before finally falling over ‘accidentally on purpose’. And nothing! Not one person paid a blind bit of notice! To be honest, I felt somewhat miffed that no one even asked me if I was okay.”

“I picked myself up, and then ten minutes later, when there was a whole different bunch of people about, I tried it again. Nothing. People just weren’t interested. I did it a third time and finally, finally! one old lady came over and asked me if I was all right!”

What I had done here, of course, was to ‘prescribe the symptom’ – a well-known and highly effective therapeutic technique. Therapeutic progress was extremely swift after this.

But what’s the best way of getting your clients to *accept* your task suggestions?

There are three principles to apply:

## **1) Get them curious**

The way you ‘package’ your task request can make all the difference. Instead of just issuing a blunt instruction like:

*Just go fall over at the shopping mall! That will do it!”*

spend some time building up the client's curiosity. Talk in general terms about how we all imagine all sorts of stuff about life without actually *testing* whether these imaginings are real. Speculate about how such testing might be effectively carried out.

Present this idea in a couple of different ways, then suggest you have 'something in mind' for them that may change 'all kinds of things'. Put on a thoughtful look, trance out a bit yourself, then, when they seem to really want to know – and only then – deliver your proposal.

## **2) Offer them a little so they'll take a lot**

Actually, what I first suggested to my client was that she should just stumble in the mall. She agreed to that, but then, as we were talking about it, she *herself* suggested it would be more effective if she fell over properly, as she thought a stumble might not be noticed. Now she had ownership of at least part of the idea, and was therefore much more likely to carry it out.

## **3) Offer one hard choice and one (comparatively) easy one**

The rule of contrast is psychologically powerful.

If someone tells me it will cost £450 to have my car seats refitted in sheepskin, I have to think about it. "Do I want to pay £450 for that?". But if they've just sold me a £33,000 Land Cruiser, I'm barely going to notice that sheepskin option – "What the heck! What's a measly £450?" (in comparison with the £33,000 I just spent!)

When negotiating with your client, present them with a more difficult task first, and then watch them grab hold of the alternative (easier) one with relief. So, for example, I could have asked my self conscious client to scream during her fake fall – thus calling even more of the dreaded attention to herself.

If she'd really thought about what that option might mean, the compromise of 'just tripping up' without the amateur dramatic shrieking would have seemed a relative relief in comparison. So consider presenting two options: one obviously much harder and the other, what you really want them to do.

Getting clients to act differently is, after all, almost a definition of the purpose of therapy and sometimes we can get them to do this in the simplest of ways, that is, by asking them.

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The next [precision hypnosis online course](#) starts on 2 November and there are still some early bird places left, but they will all have flown away by 12 October, so don’t delay. There are only 25 places on each course, so we can give everyone full attention.

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See you in a fortnight.

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Psychology trainers since 1995

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