The Provocative Style

by Dr. E. Noni Höfner

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1. History

Let's briefly go back in our minds to the spirit prevailing in the field of psychotherapy in the United States at the beginning of the 60s: psychoanalysis was in full bloom and every American worth his salt (and able to afford it) had his personal psychoanalyst, whom he saw several times a week, often for many years, if possible throughout his life. Conversational therapy was reasonably well established, behavioural therapy was still in its early stages and either derided or defamed in Europe. For, as they said, it did not reach the problem's core, but merely carried out cosmetic changes on the surface, so that the symptom was bound to crop up again elsewhere. Such nonsense was still taught to us students (in full earnest) at the end of the 60s at the University of Munich, which at the time was strictly psychoanalytically oriented. And such opinions continue to flare up occasionally to this day.

Against this background, it is actually astonishing that Provocative Therapy even had a chance to come into being. At the beginning of the 60s, a young American therapist called Frank Farrelly, collaborating in a project with Carl Rogers, lost his patience with a chronically schizophrenic patient. He had worked with him during more than ninety hours of strict conversational therapy and had continuously assured him that he was fundamentally a valuable person and full of potential. The client reacted with equal continuity and with resistance, lacking motivation and insisting that he had no abilities whatsoever. In the 91st session, Farrelly abruptly did a volte-face and began to enthusiastically agree with the patient's negative self-assessment. As a matter of fact, yes, he assured him, he was worthless, useless and ugly, a complete failure, incapable of anything, having practically no future prospects, etc. Without any transition, the sunk-down, lethargic patient straightened up and began to defend himself: he was quite capable of this and that, after all, and he listed his abilities with an energy he had never shown before. This was the moment in which Provocative Therapy was born.

In the last decades, Provocative Therapy has found adherents all over the world and many users have fashioned their own version of it. That is by all means desirable, since the procedure is quite open and the personality of the user plays an important part in it. In the late 70s and early 80s, Farrelly was one of the "master models" for Grinder and Bandler as they developed NLP. This fact is usually silently ignored by them – at least in their writings. Therefore, NLP-users often tell me in my training seminars that they already know provocative interventions from NLP. Here cause and effect have been interchanged.

I met Farrelly in 1985 and developed Provocative Therapy into the so-called Provocative Style, since my experience has shown that the provocative approach is not only an effective form of therapy for deeply dysfunctional people, but also a means of communication that can be applied in various areas of interpersonal interaction.

2. What's it all about?

a) The importance of emotions

Provocative Therapy and the Provocative Style are for short-term counselling and therapy. Provocative Therapy is part of cognitive behavioural therapy, although it is actually more of an **emotional behavioural therapy**, since its leverage point is the emotional energy inherent in every

symptom. It takes a certain effort to uphold symptoms – think, for instance, of the energy with which anorexic clients control every ounce of their weight. The driving force that keeps symptoms alive is not reason but emotion or, to put it differently: emotional energy. If you want to influence a person, the impulse for change must stem from emotions. No-one has ever changed because of rational insights alone.

The emotional energy initially manifests itself in the client's strong resistance against change. Although his symptoms are somewhere between annoying and unbearable for him, he nevertheless clings to his ingrained and familiar feelings, mental processes and modes of behaviour. Provocative interventions use this emotional energy and redirect it, so that emotional resistance against the symptoms emerges. If the counsellor[1] has a trained eye, then the therapy can be very short in duration, since it dependably functions with everyone, from toddlers to the elderly, if you press the right emotionally charged "button". For instance, you can claim that the client does not actually want to change, because he is too old, too stupid, too fat, too blond, etc. Generally, this provokes resistance in the client, especially if he has already had vaguely similar thoughts himself. If you say to a three-year-old: "You're too small to put the jacket on by yourself," he will do all he can to prove you wrong. A seasoned man can be put into motion with a statement like: "What a pity, but unfortunately you're not intelligent enough for a change in behaviour."

The Provocative Style works like a pill which gradually releases its active substance into the system. In this process, reason always lags behind the emotional activity. First, there is a change in behaviour and feeling and then, ideally, insight or understanding follow. Since the human being is always thirsting for rational explanations, clients often put together some kind of explanation in retrospect, which must not necessarily be correct. Often, they do not even ascribe their change in behaviour to the interventions of the counsellor, although this connection would be recognized by any outside onlooker. Bearing the client's missing show of affection without complaint contributes to the learning process inherent in the profession and strengthens the moral fibre of the counsellor.

After a provocative counselling, the client is nearly always confused, since his emotional "corsage" is in turmoil. Not to worry: this is intended. To make an encrusted system flexible again, you first need to upset it. It therefore makes no sense to ask the client right after the counselling whether he now knows what he wants to do, because you will receive no or only an unsatisfactory pseudo-answer.

b) Provocation and humour as basis for the Provocative Style

As the name suggests, provocation – a challenge – is an integral component of the Provocative Style. The provocative counsellor challenges the client to leave his habitual patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour behind and to venture into new, unfamiliar territory. The best way to do this is to make the client laugh about himself. This relaxes the client, attenuates the emotional charge of the symptom and lays the ground for change.

It is considerably more difficult to laugh about yourself than to make fun of others. We immediately see the mote in another person's eye, that is to say, the absurdity of their thoughts, feelings or behaviour. But we have gotten used to the beam in our own eye, so that we do not notice it, but rather view it as organically given.

[1] Of course, this applies to both male and female counsellors and clients. Pardon if, for convenience's sake, for reasons of style and because of my own phlegm, I only specify in this one instance that I am always referring to both genders.

No one is made fun of in the Provocative Style. Only a person with a sense of humour can laugh about himself, but humour and laughter are not conterminous. Some kinds of laughter have nothing to do with humour at all. Laughter which exposes another person, belittles or hurts them, is an instrument of power, loaded with the negative emotions of the person who laughs. It mainly serves to make the person who is laughing feel superior and rid himself of his aggressions.

c) Brakes on growth and lorries

After my first workshop in Provocative Therapy with Frank Farrelly in June 1985 I felt as if I had been run over by a lorry. In this workshop, Frank Farrelly had cheerfully broken every rule of therapy which I had hitherto viewed as carved in stone. He had dared to laugh heartily with his clients about their problems, rather than pitying them because of their suffering, protecting and mothering them, with a compassionate expression on his face. This was radically new, not only for me, but for nearly all participants in the workshop. We laughed through the entire weekend and left the workshop utterly confused. Afterwards I realized that I had found what I had long been looking for: a procedure that provides quick relief for the clients and newly revives their personal responsibility in domains in which they had previously abandoned it.

I use the metaphor of a lorry for the procedure of the Provocative Style. Not only because I felt as if I had been hit by a lorry after Farrelly's workshop, but also because provocative interventions are so strong and imperturbable and so quickly show a result – like a lorry driving at full speed.

A lorry illustrates the beefy power of this method. Equally important is the affectionate caricaturing of the client's brakes on growth.[2] Brakes on growth[3] prevent a person from fully exploiting their capacities and from dismissing ideas about their own personality that they have grown fond of but which are self-damaging. Yet brakes on growth unfortunately also help to reduce fears, because they ensure that new challenges, efforts and insecurities are avoided. Since the result of a change in feeling, thought and behaviour remains uncertain, passivity causes less fear than actively changing things. Avoiding fear is the consolation prize, which unfortunately has unpleasant side effects in the form of annoying symptoms. The jackpot would be control over one's own life, enjoying self-responsibility and self-fulfilment, as well as the joy of coping with difficult life tasks.

d) Focussing on the client's strengths

When affectionately caricaturizing a client's brakes on growth the focus lies on "affectionately". The point is not to go easy on the client and to carefully wrap him up in cotton wool, following the erroneous belief that he is more fragile than delicate porcelain. "Affectionately" refers to a general esteem of the client and an unconditional belief in his abilities. The main focus of the provocative counsellor is therefore always on the client's extant power reserves and his future possibilities, not on deficits and past traumas. He fully concentrates on the strengths of the client, harbours sympathy and goodwill for him and has confidence in his strengths. He assumes that with most clients, especially with those who are still able to make it to the counsellor's office of their own accord, their thoughts, feelings and behaviour show far more healthy aspects than ill ones. The client is not weak and helpless, nor is he lost without the omniscient therapist. On the contrary, he is mature, responsible and strong and theoretically has sufficient means at his disposal to solve his problems

[2] Translator's note: Here, Höfner uses the acronym LKW (an abbreviation for "Lastkraftwagen", "lorry"), which she also applies to the affectionate caricaturing of the client's brakes on growth (**L**iebevolles **K**arikieren der **W**achstumsbremsen).

[3] The brakes on growth can be cowardice, laziness and fixation. These are explained in detail in my books "Das wäre doch gelacht!" (rororo) and "Glauben Sie ja nicht, wer Sie sind!" (Carl-Auer-Verlag).

and take his life into his own hands again. He merely has difficulties accessing his power reserves at the moment, because he is currently stuck both emotionally and mentally.

This esteem is rarely (if ever) verbally expressed in the Provocative Style. Instead, the counsellor trusts the power of his body language. Real benevolence can be understood without words and by anyone – and it is quite difficult to simulate. Through this nonverbal support and by simultaneously unashamedly pointing out the stumbling blocks which the client would rather gloss over, the counsellor does not exercise exterior pressure in the least, but rather provokes healing emotions in the client and hence a positive internal pressure towards change.

The goal of provocative counselling is to break open emotionally charged fixed ideas,[4] with which the client harms himself, and to strengthen his personal responsibility, so that he becomes capable of thinking and acting again. This allows him to take decisions which are better for his wellbeing than the hitherto practised temporary solutions and to purposefully work towards their implementation.

3. Ethics, values and critical reflection

The Provocative Style offers scope for criticism, because the provocative counsellor does not follow set rules, simply because "it's always been done this way" or because they are allegedly tried and tested and therefore considered sacrosanct. Such criticism is mainly voiced by people whose opinion is not impaired by any knowledge of the provocative principles. One of the most common reproaches is that of superficiality, because laughter and serious counselling supposedly do not go together. Another objection I have heard in every seminar during the more than twenty years that I am now teaching Provocative Style to professionals: the participants fear that laughing about the clients' stumbling blocks will hurt them, that they will misinterpret it and feel laughed at. This would lead to them ending the therapy and make the clients' misery even worse. Both objections are worth considering in more detail.

a) Humour in therapy

Humour plays a central role in the Provocative Style. There is much laughter, but the appreciative, sympathetic attitude of the therapist is the indispensable basis for this laughter. The counsellor stands shoulder to shoulder with the client and only makes fun of his self-damaging stumbling blocks. The Provocative Style is not a weapon but rather a lubricant for communication which has become rusty, as well as a cure within the context of psychotherapy and counselling.

Constructive humour helps both clients and therapists and counsellors to put their own point of view into perspective and to not consider themselves the hub of the world.[5] This is the precondition for the client being able to view the traps and stumbling blocks he puts in his own way from a healthy distance. Humour protects from blind spots, dogmatism, fixed ideas and ideological battles.

The use of humour in psychotherapy was prohibited for a long time or at least considered dubious malpractice. Therapists generally agreed that the client has suffered and is still suffering and that he must be led through more suffering, wailing and gnashing of teeth in order to heal. The absurdity of such an approach might already be a source for amusement, if it did not have such serious consequences. I once encountered a sentence in psychoanalytical literature, the gist of which was: "If

[4] ALL fixed ideas are emotionally charged.

[5] There is a witticism which therapists generally only understand with some delay: "What's the difference between a therapist and God?" – "God doesn't believe that he is a therapist."

a client laughs during the therapy session, this is a neurotic regression and must be stopped immediately!"

Laughing and crying are essential components of the human emotional balance and both should have their place in counselling. A counsellor or therapist must not be afraid of tears, but he should not be delighted either and believe that he has finally gotten through to "real feelings" when his client bursts into tears.

Only in the last years, researchers have slowly and cautiously started to examine humour in therapy. Humour as the core element of therapy or counselling still remains something quite unusual. That is actually surprising, because humour is by definition a healing force.[6] However, there are still many prejudices. The pejorative term "Spaßgesellschaft" ("fun society") is brought into play, in order to put the use of humour in its place and to reduce it to an unimportant accessory in counselling. So-called laughter groups, which have formed in many cities with the goal of regularly laughing together, are smugly sneered at. Yet there are worse reasons to meet up than to learn to laugh again, something which many people have forgotten in the course of their adult life. The other extreme, certain self-experience groups in which everyone is lying in wait for someone finally to lose their nerves and be shaken by tears, are, to my mind, considerably less productive for the mobilization of constructive emotions.

b) The personality of the user

In addition to the appreciative attitude which never judges the client, a constructive use of the Provocative Style requires a high degree of integrity and self-reflection on the part of the user – even more so than many other forms of therapy. The nonreflective use of provocative "tools" only leads to a termination of the therapy in a best-case scenario, but in the worst case the client can be seriously harmed.

The concern that one might hurt the client is only justified if the counsellor has his own agenda and is using the Provocative Style to relieve the strain on himself. Admittedly, this may be understandable when a client has been going on one's nerves for weeks and when one thinks he is barely – or not at all – capable of a change towards the better. Yet it is nevertheless not justified. After a superficial consideration of the provocative approach, some counsellors may be delighted and think that they finally have the permission to expertly dissect such a client and to give him a good whipping, but I would explicitly advise against this, if only for reasons of self-protection.

If the counsellor does not think his client capable of positive change or if he does not like him, then he has completely lost his humour. The counsellor must therefore ask himself again and again if he is still impartial and appreciates the client. Without appreciation and without confidence in the client the interventions become malicious, abusive and devastating; the client is injured and demotivated.

c) Provocation as manipulation

So the Provocative Style is intended neither to discharge aggressions nor for self-interested manipulation. That is why it is not suitable if I want to (or have to) achieve something very specific with another person. Bosses, spouses or parents should therefore only make use of the Provocative Style if they do not mind if the target of their provocation decides not to change. The decision to change never resides in the provocateur but always with the client. And if he would rather stay the

[6] According to the Wahrig German Dictionary, humour is the ability to perceive even the downsides of life with cheerful serenity and intellectual superiority.

way he is, then this should also be welcomed. A joke about psychoanalysts excellently illustrates this: Two friends meet. One asks: "So, how are you, after seven years of psychoanalysis? Are you still wetting the bed?" – "Yes," the other one replies, "but now I'm enjoying it!"

d) Ethical principles

Since this is also frequently grounds for misunderstandings, it is important to emphasize that in the Provocative Style one does not indiscriminately make fun of everything. The client has many belief systems and values which are not to be tampered with, because they have nothing to do with the problem and the client does not damage himself if he adheres to them. The counsellor is not entitled to make fun of religious beliefs, cultural differences and the like, however absurd these may seem to him. Only the brakes on growth – or stumbling blocks – of the client are being caricatured and reduced to absurdity, not the client as a whole. The fundamental esteem of his person is never questioned, the confidence in his strength and his ability to change is always resonating as an underlying melody.

4. Methodical approaches: some tools of the Provocative Style

a) Provoking resistance

The Provocative Style makes use of the spirit of contradiction and purposefully directs it against self-damage. Its methods take some getting used to, but they are efficient. The approach makes sense but is unusual.

The spirit of contradiction is part of human nature. Every mother is familiar with the following situation. She tells her son Michael: "Now be nice to each other!" and little Michael quickly hits his younger brother over the head with a toy building block before he retreats, pouting. It is impossible for him to follow the rebuke without first showing that he only does what *he* wants to do.

The human spirit of contradiction is one of the principal driving forces for change and development having taken place in the history of humankind – and for them to continue to take place. Otherwise we would still be sitting in trees. In my family of origin, the motto was: "There's no way I'll believe that." It was always used when unproven assertions were put forth, for instance supposedly new scientific findings or simple statements such as "That's not the done thing!" Copernicus and Galileo also maintained: "I won't believe that the earth is flat and the centre of the universe, even though that has been the general belief for ages!"

b) Insinuations, assertions and enthusiasm for the symptom

One way to provoke the spirit of contradiction is to use insinuations and assertions. Provocative insinuations provoke much quicker and more emotionally charged reactions in the client than questions do. With their help, the counsellor learns a lot from the client's reaction without having to enquire first. I call this active diagnose, in contrast to the passive diagnose, which requests facts and offers the client more possibilities of retreat.

The precondition for insinuations which really hit home are an increased attentiveness and a keen awareness of the "artwork client" in its entirety, that is to say, of the verbal and non-verbal signals which the client offers in abundance. These signals allow us to draw conclusions about the client's fears and fixed ideas – also known as belief systems.

With his insinuations, the provocative counsellor deliberately titillates the client's resistance against his own stumbling blocks. The counsellor claims, for instance, that it is a known fact that the client will not be able to take his life into his own hands again. After all, he has already proven this often enough, and, besides, it does not matter all that much anyway. Then he lists all the advantages of the client's self-damaging behaviour and adds a few more, which the client had not even thought of. He shrugs off the disadvantages – for instance, constant headaches and other annoying symptoms. After all, they do by no means compensate for the advantages. The counsellor is downright enthusiastic about the symptoms. He thus agrees with the client regarding his self-damaging thoughts, emotions and behaviour. In fact, he agrees more than the client would perhaps like him to do. He advises him to maintain this behaviour at all costs, to expand it even, since it has so many advantages, whereas he declares any possible change as much too dangerous and too strenuous or even entirely impossible.

Since with his claims, the counsellor sides with the client, the client's emotional resistance turns on his own stumbling blocks, which are in the way of his development – and not against the counsellor. For it is quite difficult to contradict a person agreeing with you. The counterproductive thoughts, feelings and behaviour can no longer be maintained and new feelings, thinking habits and modes of behaviour get a chance. This produces considerably more permanent, lasting changes than the best encouragement ever could.

c) Sweeping generalizations or the reversal of roles between counsellor and client

Extreme claims always provoke resistance. The mobilization of the client's emotional resistance therefore increases as the counsellor's exaggerations become more and more reckless. He holds a distorting mirror up to the client, reflecting his character, behaviour and motivation, in which the client looks as if he was in a house of mirrors at a funfair. If the caricatured insinuations hit home, because there is some truth in it, then the client feels challenged. He simply cannot accept these exaggerated representations of himself without comment. The caricature of the self-damaging belief systems of the client must be exaggerated to the point that even the client can experience their absurdity and laugh at them. Yet in certain cases, it can be quite astonishing for how long a client will be agreeing with the counsellor before he starts to laugh and disagree.

The provocative counsellor does not shy away from generalizations and stereotyping, but he also makes use of the beneficial effects of the spirit of contradiction. The more sweeping the counsellor's generalizations, the more the client is forced to differentiate and to classify. Here, counsellor and client exchange roles, for it is usually the client who makes sweeping generalizations and the counsellor who differentiates.

This is very helpful, because, as a rule, the clients' self-damaging systems of belief are very generalizing and have a devastating influence on their behaviour. For instance, when a client is firmly convinced that all men are pigs, she will approach this odious species in a very specific, hostile manner. Since her counterpart does not react in a particularly friendly manner to this hostility, her prejudice will continually be confirmed. Yet if the counsellor states with utter conviction that she is absolutely right and that a decent man never tread on this earth, the client automatically switches to mental "search mode" and asserts that she actually does know a decent man, namely her former music teacher. From now on, she has two criteria for classifying men, which will change her behaviour. Since this was her own idea, the change in her thoughts, feelings and behaviour will be more sustainable than if someone else had had to suggest it to her.

d) Idiotic advice

The most common trap for a counsellor is the client's demand: "Please tell me what I am supposed to do!" If you heed this demand and give straightforward advice, you generally come into the client's defensive fire, who dissects every bit of advice with relish, declares it as useless and proves to the counsellor why precisely *this* piece of advice does not work for him, the client.

The provocative counsellor willingly offers as much advice as the client wants, often even without being prompted and much more than the client actually wishes for. Yet this advice has one catch: it is absolutely crazy. This forces the client to find his own solutions, for it becomes clear to him that he cannot expect anything from the counsellor in that direction. However, the situation can sometimes become embarrassing if the client suddenly seriously believes that one of the idiotic suggestions is indeed useful. In such cases, further exaggeration is called for.

e) The authenticity of the counsellor

When exaggerating the fixed ideas and the self-damaging behavioural patterns, the provocative counsellor never becomes moralizing. The counsellor not only agrees more with the client than the client might like, but he also points out and caricatures the unspoken, subliminal, emotionally charged and hence firmly cemented convictions of the client which might stand in the way of change. So he keeps saying things which he himself does not believe but which he thinks the client believes – or might believe, at least to some extent.

Such an approach is particularly difficult for experienced counsellors, since it undermines their belief in their own credibility, authenticity and congruence. Yet the provocative counsellor always remains congruent and authentic in his general *appreciation* of the client. Only his *statements* are determined by the – assumed or observed – system of beliefs of the client. He by no means has to share these, but through the exaggerated and generalized assertions he makes, these become more visible to the client and he becomes more aware of them. The counsellor thus takes on the dark, unhealthy side of the client, who, for reasons of equilibrium, is practically forced to take on the healthy side.

f) A case study

Here is the unabridged beginning of a conversation with a woman who came to me for counselling. It shows how quickly she is thrown off course if I agree with her in an exaggerated manner, how she is able to laugh about herself and how she feels like disagreeing with my claims:

Cl: My man is driving me crazy at the moment.
Th: How long have you been stuck with him?
Cl: Five years now.
Th: Ah, a so-called late marriage. You took your time.
Cl: Love with grey hair.
Th: How old are you?
Cl: Forty-seven.
Th: So at the tender age of forty-two you decided to marry this man.
Cl: We're not married!
Th: *(astonished)* You're not even married! Well, that's great! Then you only need to say "I divorce you!" three times as they do in the Orient and then he's gone. That's really easy!
Cl: Currently, I'm only saying it once.
Th: Then he'll be gone immediately. He'll be happy if you throw him out.
Cl: I don't know. *(pensive)* I believe he's thinking along those lines, yes …
Th: Okay. And you want to get there first, so you're not the one left behind in the end. Many women do that. Before he tells me tonight, "I'm leaving", I say, as soon he comes through the door: "OUT!"

Cl: The problem is: it's his house. So if ever, I would have to go.
Th: Ah, well you didn't arrange that very well!
Cl: *(laughs)* No, I didn't.
Th: So you're stuck with a man who's getting on your nerves.
Cl: I was in Sri Lanka for three weeks, a holiday without him …
Th: I can see your eyes light up.
(Both laugh)
Cl: … with a friend. I did an Ayurveda-cure. And it's actually a time when usually, my boyfriend and I, go together on holiday. It's the only time of year when we have time off at the same time. And this year I decided that this cure is more important for me.
Th: Okay. And you told him "You know, Henry, before you annoy me for three weeks, I'd rather do an Ayurveda cure with my friend Lucy. Because then I'll actually have fun." Something uplifting like that.
Cl: Perhaps I said that, yes. I said it more politely. I said, "I need this, I'm doing this …"
Th: Right, and "I don't need you!"
Cl: That's his interpretation. I didn't say that.
Th: Of course not. But you thought it.
Cl: No, I didn't think that. I was pondering.
(Both laugh)
Th: *(admiringly)* So apparently you're quite good at finding your way out. You didn't say it. You thought it, but you remained polite, although you actually told him: "Going on holiday with you is absolute crap. I'd rather go with a friend. That's more important to me than you are." And he understood exactly that. But you're safe, because you packaged it in a way that it's all his fault. You can now say *(indignantly)* "Where did you get such an idea from? I never meant it that way!"
Cl: *(pensively)* Yes.
Th: *(with enthusiasm)* Great! Good on you!
Cl: Your interpretation of the situation is new to me.
Th: But at any rate he understood it. And then he started thinking: if I am unimportant to her, then I will have to think about how important she actually is for me.
Cl: Yes …
Th: And then he realizes: actually, she's not as important for me as I thought. *(rejoicing)* Surprise!
Cl: Well, at any rate he is currently making me feel as if I weren't as important for him.
Th: *(indignantly)* That's outrageous! I think that if anyone is entitled to make someone feel like they're unimportant, then it's you who should make him feel that way!
(Both laugh)

The conversation then turned to the ever shorter duration of the men in the client's life (she has a son who is now twenty years old, from an earlier relationship that lasted ten years) and about the never failing hope of changing the current man at her side, until he corresponds 100% to her ideal. The client's complexion kept changing during this conversation, an infallible sign that she was emotionally involved. After the conversation she said: "Your thought patterns, they come so quickly that I was really busy following your line of thought, understanding it. Confusion, laughter … I often had the feeling that I wanted to explain myself, to say that it's actually not like this at all, that I am in fact completely different and that I want something completely different. My thoughts are whirling around now."

5. Essence and meaning

The goal of provocative interventions is not a final, ultimate solution to a problem, proposed by an expert, but rather finding and removing stumbling blocks, thereby enabling the client to find his own solution, adapted specifically to him. Once the client is emotionally convinced that the solution fits his problem, it is sustainable and enduring.

So what is at the heart of this method is not a custom-made solution, but the process in the here and now, taking place during the counselling session. In the Provocative Style, only a very limited number of questions are asked (e.g. family status, number of children, etc.) and even these develop out of the counselling process and are not ticked off at the beginning. The myriad of insinuations which the counsellor produces instead result from his assessment of the client. And he learns a lot about the client from his reactions. The insinuations are very dynamic, they can change as soon as a new aspect comes into play. This occasionally makes the counselling process somewhat confusing, even for the counsellor, for he cannot proceed straightforwardly from A to B but has to hop around like a dervish chasing a swarm of mosquitoes. This erratic procedure is chosen on purpose, since we follow the client's emotional dodges as they appear in the counselling process and not as they might suit a model inside the counsellor's head.

The Provocative Style is nevertheless very much goal- and solution-oriented, but the goal and the solution are entirely up to the client. The counsellor does not necessarily have to know about the goal or the solution which the client chooses as suitable for himself. This is also something which especially experienced counsellors have great difficulty with. They are used to asking many questions initially, narrowing down the problem, defining goals together with the client and then developing a solution, which is tested for its usability, usually by means of homework.

Instead, the provocative counsellor creates the preconditions for the client finding the solution himself. A solution one has found on one's own is far more sustainable than any idea of a third person, no matter how brilliant it might be. No counsellor will ever be able to know as well as the client[7] what is good for him. This is equally true if the premise is that the client is convinced that there is no solution for his problem. When his emotional involvement is weighted differently, he experiences his problem from a new point of view. Then solutions suddenly become visible and this opens doors which he had not seen beforehand. This new perspective is not the result of a rational mental process, but that of an emotional reorientation. Each new decision is therefore as sustainable as its emotional underpinning – and no further.

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Trainings in Provocative Therapy and in the Provocative Style are offered at the German Institute for Provocative Therapy (www.provokativ.com)

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[7] The possibilities of our language unfortunately often put us on the wrong track. If I use terms such as "conviction", "decision", "point of view", etc. I never refer to an exclusively rational process but always to events that are based on emotions. The term "to know" also refers to emotional and not to rational knowledge.