Asperger's in (and outside) the therapy room

In the ninth of this series about working with clients who have been, or may be, diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, PETER FLOWERDEW looks at creating dialogue by 'weaponising' the discount matrix

BELIEVE THAT the contents of this series is relevant to all fields of TA. To create a quality of relationship Letween an NT¹ and an Aspie² that fosters mutual understanding, acceptance, valuing and trust is not just for individual therapy in the therapy room:

- It is relevant in working with couples and families; a number of Aspie/NT couples have reported profound positive changes to their relationships and parents have obtained an insight into the challenges their children have and understanding and support are the result.
- It is relevant to providing a learning environment adapted to the needs of Aspie children; a number of counsellors, teachers and parents have recognised Asperger's traits in their schoolchildren, and adapted their expectations and relational style accordingly, and some very young children have received a formal diagnosis, releasing funding and support for them in school.
- It is relevant to teaching members of organisations, how to create a working environment and a quality of working relationships that permit Aspies to be integrated and to thrive, contribute to and enhance the success of the organisation. I have attended meetings with HR personnel, and line managers, to resolve relational and communication problems involving Aspies working in local government, in schools and in commercial organisations - in each case the resolution of the perceived problem has led to positive outcomes in terms of performance, job satisfaction and mutual valuing and

The topic of this article is a tool, a technique, that adds to the repertoire of my clients, both NT and Aspie, but it was first developed to confront denial with people addicted to mood altering chemicals, and then taught to teenagers, as a tool for assertiveness. I then modified it slightly for my work with couples, as a tool to identify and challenge discounting, thus resolving Rackets and Games in the relationship; and forming the ground for a warm, affectionate, intimacy.

Why the title? In the context of 'confronting', 'challenging' and 'standing up for yourself' stating 'where you stand' and what you want from someone who may not wish to 'concede', requires courage, and that means that on some level we are 'fighting'; and a tool to

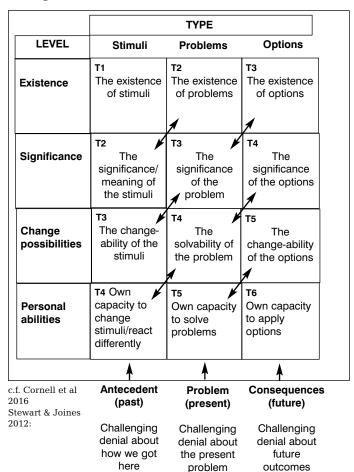


Figure 1: Reframing the discount matrix

help us 'fight back' is a 'weapon'. I am going to share a simplification and re-framing of the discount matrix, to turn it into a tool, to empower people to confront, and challenge others, in order to discover who 'is on their side' and keep themselves safe in non-ideal relationships.

Drug treatment

When I began my TA training I was working with clients who had addictions, mostly to heroin or alcohol and the

most exciting theory of the first year was the discount matrix: because here was a road map, a treatment plan, for working with denial. I loved it but it was the one piece of TA theory that I could not share with my clients; it was too complicated.

Over time I found myself discussing the existence and the significance of major problems that they were discussing; and the possibility and desirability of making different choices.

Discounting was almost always on the level of 'Significance'.

What I was intuitively doing was working in a single column of the matrix, as indicated at the base of Fig. 1.

The model of Antecedents, Behaviour, Consequences, was already being used by CBT trained therapists. Now I think of,

- Present: Accept that there is a difficulty.
- Past: What led to being in this difficulty.
- Future: What can be done to minimise the

impact going forward or avoid this situation in the future.

Now, just one column of the grid is considered at a time, as shown in Fig. 2, and this was my CBTA (Cognitive Behavioural TA) approach to working with people on a community drug addictions program.

It indicates a clear line of contracting, from clarification of the problem to commitment to change that the client has identified as feasible for them, in a way that is easily communicated. It automatically gives responsibility to the client and clear indications of progress.

This diagrammed, structured, approach can also 'anchor' Aspies in an otherwise potentially stressful 'open-ended' process. Even the purpose of 'exploration' is given a place.

Anger management

When I started working with children, I realised that many had never had the resolution of difference, misunderstandings or disagreements modelled in their family. They would come, angry, frustrated, and in trouble because their angry feelings got expressed in angry behaviour; shouting, intimidation, violence; either emotional deregulation or behaviours that had been modelled for them.

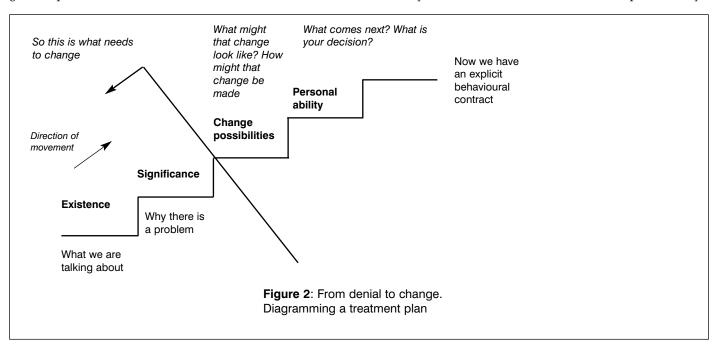
They were experiencing something that angered them; other people were responding in a way that did not work for them. They were experiencing discounts; so now these steps became a tool for assertiveness. (See Fig. 3)

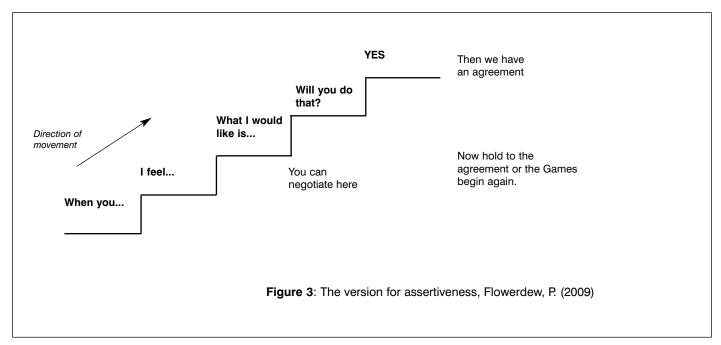
Some Aspies have trouble identifying their feelings, so they may need help to express the significance of what is happening in language that is meaningful to them and understandable by NTs. When working with clients who are developing friendships or romantic relationships, the significance is that 'I don't like/want that' - and in a relationship where you say you care, that should be reason enough for change. (See Fig. 4)

With most clients, we will draw this diagram with the statements to be made to the other person filled in below each step. Then I can coach them on how to say what they want to say. Then they take that with them. In one diagram we have the Awareness of what they want, the Permission to act on that awareness and the Program, the Adult means to deliver the message.

The most generalised form that I teach to students, Fig. 5, is framed as the 'bullseye' form of a negative conditional stroke - because you can hit every level of discount in one sentence.

Being able to express to another person what it is that reduces your comfort or trust in a relationship is the way





to achieve a sense of safety. We cannot keep ourselves safe if we are unable to protest and be heard. So, I consider this the single most important tool in relationship building. My catchphrase is: 'if I can tell you what I don't like and expect to get less; and I can tell you what I do like and expect to get more; then this relationship is becoming more valuable to me".

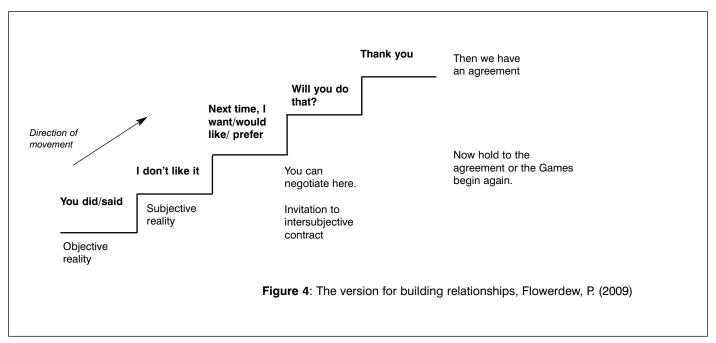
A bit of theory

I am aware that in educational TA (Napper & Newton, 2000) and developmental TA (Hay, 1995) there are 'step' processes based on addressing levels of discounting. These, I understand to focus on the development of an

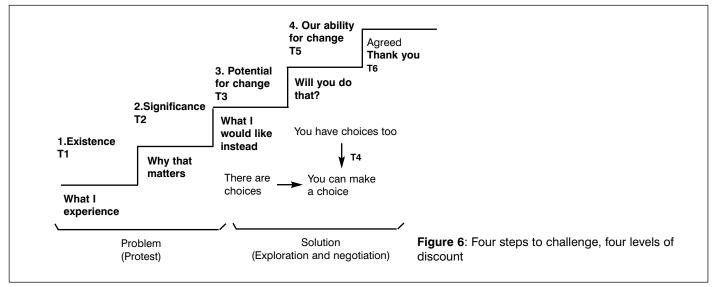
individual or the management of change in an organisation. The tools I have outlined are designed to improve personal relationships by addressing Rackets and Games; they are fundamentally relational, can be placed within the model of Time Structuring (the next article) and can be understood as sub-elements of the discount matrix, as indicated in Fig. 6.

The steps can be applied to the present situation, to the antecedents or the consequences. If applied to all three, that creates the matrix (Fig.1). The steps and the matrix can be applied to 'self' or the 'other' or to the 'situation.

If the conditional negative stroke is not accepted, the



The one choice that we never had as a child and that we do have as an adult, is to walk away from a relationship Agreed that hurts us. But many people, 'trained' to tolerate the intolerable, do not see that as an option, or inhibit themselves from taking it. Thank you "And if that is too much to ask" Next time, I want/would ...I have other choices Will you do like/ prefer that? Now hold to the You have choices too What I agreement or the Games would like begin again. instead There are choices Why that matters What I At least protest! experience Figure 5: Steps to change a relationship. Flowerdew, P. (2009)



person using the tool can identify on which step the discount is occurring and address it; then move upwards through the remaining steps.

I hope that you find these tools useful for yourself and for your clients.

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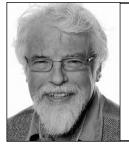
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- 1 A Neurotypical: in this context, someone not an Aspie.
- 2 Someone with significant traits of Asperger's Syndrome -unhelpfully conflated with childhood autism in DSM5, but differentiated from it in ICD10



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