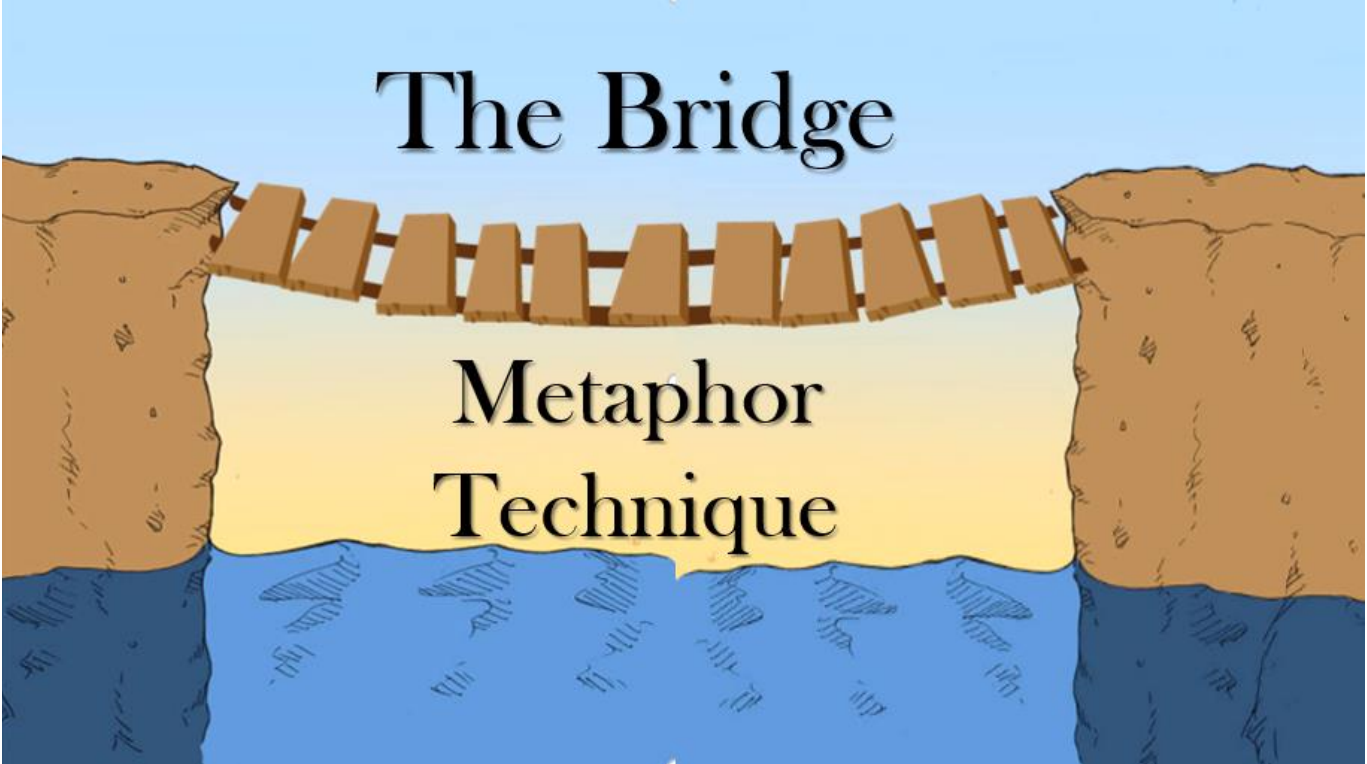


The Bridge



Metaphor Technique

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INTRODUCTION

The Bridge Metaphor Technique uses basic principles from Egan's¹ skilled helper process within the metaphor of building a bridge to engage clients in the process of planning for change. I first used this metaphor to give students an easy way to engage clients actively in developing their plan for change, but has since been using myself since it is so simple, easy to use and effective.

The process of developing and implementing an action plan for positive change can be challenging for both the client and the counsellor. Clients are often in a state of crisis and find it difficult to conceptualise their problem situation in concrete terms.

The Bridge Metaphor Technique is a simple process of using the building of a bridge as a metaphor for planning how to implement the actions to obtain desired results. It is a very concrete metaphor and easy to understand for both adults and children. The bridge as a metaphor provides an opportunity for clients to become fully engaged in the process of defining their current problem situation, developing a clear outcome and realistic action plan.

While the metaphor provides an opportunity for clients to immerse themselves in this process, the metaphor also provides some distance from the heavy emotional content clients often experience. This distance from the emotional intensity of their situation is what allows them to engage more fully. The reduction of the emotional intensity also reduces reluctance to engage fully in the process, something that is often experienced by counsellors as "resistance" on the part of the client.

EGAN'S SKILLED HELPER MODEL

Egan proposes a helping process consisting of three stages:

1. The present scenario
2. The preferred scenario
3. Getting there

The Present Scenario

When focusing on the present scenario the counsellor helps the client to identify, explore and clarify their problem situation. It is necessary for a client to understand their problem situation before they will be able to manage it or plan for change. The present scenario is the client's current situation which causes distress or dysfunction.

¹ Egan, G. (1990) *The Skilled Helper*. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company: California

The Preferred Scenario

Egan explains the preferred scenario as the goals, objectives or agendas of the client based on an action-oriented understand of the problem situation. It is the outcome that the client wants.

Getting There

The action strategies for accomplishing the outcome is how the client will “get there”. Clients are often able to describe their current problem situation as well as their desired outcome, but have considerable difficulty in developing and implementing a realistic action plan to get them to their desired outcome.

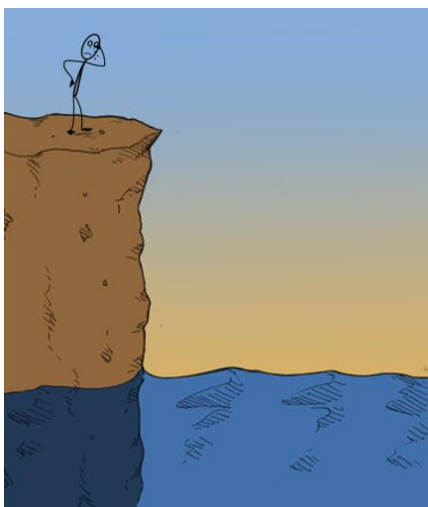
THE PROCESS OF THE BRIDGE METAPHOR

The process for using the bridge as a metaphor consists of the following steps:

1. Explain the metaphor
2. Define the present scenario
3. Define the preferred scenario
4. Develop action steps
5. Develop supportive actions
6. Define risk factors
7. Develop corrective actions

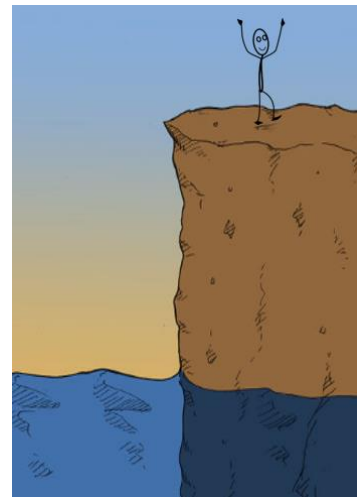
1. Explain the metaphor

It is important that the client understands the metaphor in order to engage productively in the process of constructing an action plan.

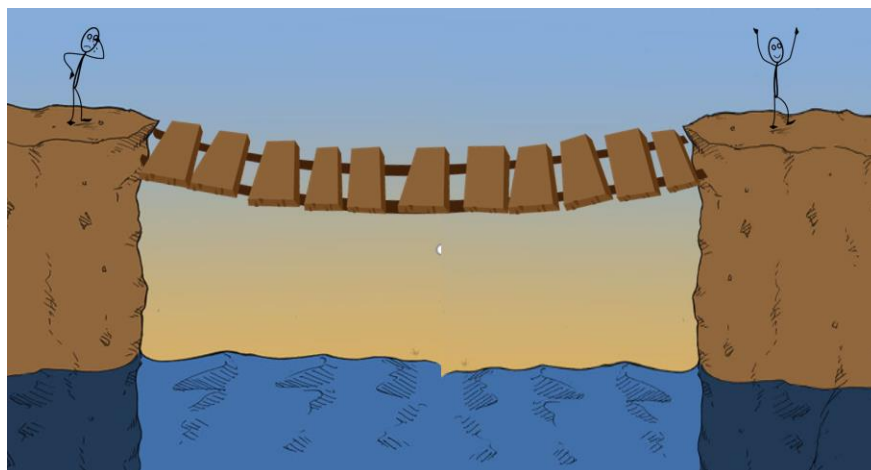


You find yourself in an uncomfortable situation. This uncomfortable situation (problem) is something you want to get away from or improve. It is almost like standing on the edge of a cliff with nowhere else to go. You have done everything you know how to get to here, but if you move forward now, you will find yourself in treacherous waters. Perhaps you feel stuck. You may feel as if you have reached the end of your wits and don't know how to get out of this situation.

At the same time, you can imagine that you want to reach the other side of the cliff in order to get to where you want to be. Over there, the problem situation has been resolved and you have the things you want and need to be fulfilled and happy. You can look over there, but you don't yet know how to get there.



So, the dilemma is how to get from your present situation to your ideal, future situation. One way of getting there is to use a bridge, and in order to get you to where you want to be, we will construct a “bridge of actions” to move you towards your ideal situation.



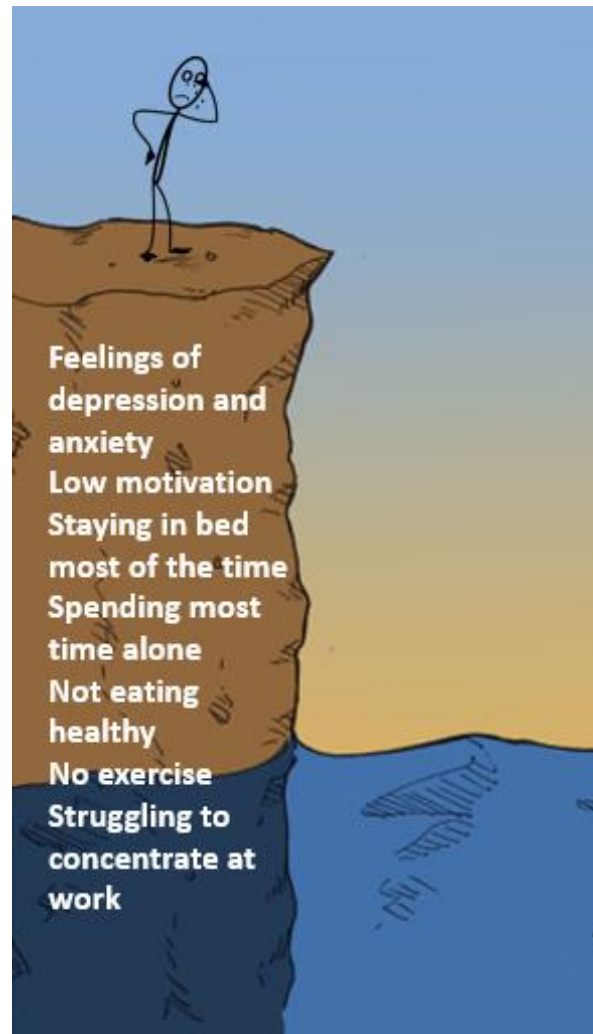
The bridge will consist of actions you need to take to move closer towards your ideal situation, one step at a time.

2. Define the present scenario

Help the client to define the present scenario by allowing the client to tell their story, in their own words and at their own pace. The role of the counsellor is to listen and respond empathically in a non-judgemental manner. No solutions are offered or explored during this stage, but if the client mentions ideas or possible solutions these are noted down for later use.

The counsellor makes use of skills such as active listening, reflecting of feelings, paraphrasing, summarising, open-ended questioning, clarification and challenging to help the client tell the story and explore various aspects of the present scenario.

Once the counsellor and the client have explored the problem situation in sufficient detail, it can be summarised by noting down the most important aspects.



Define the preferred scenario

Once the present scenario has been explored in detail and the most important aspects noted down, it is time to explore and define the preferred scenario. This consists of the outcomes that the client wants.

An outcome is the end result. It must be described in terms of what the client will see, hear and feel. It is the situation and state that the client will experience once the problem situation has been resolved completely.

When this (problem situation) has been resolved completely and you have your ideal situation, how will you know? What are the things you will see, hear and feel that will be evidence that you have obtained the outcome you want?

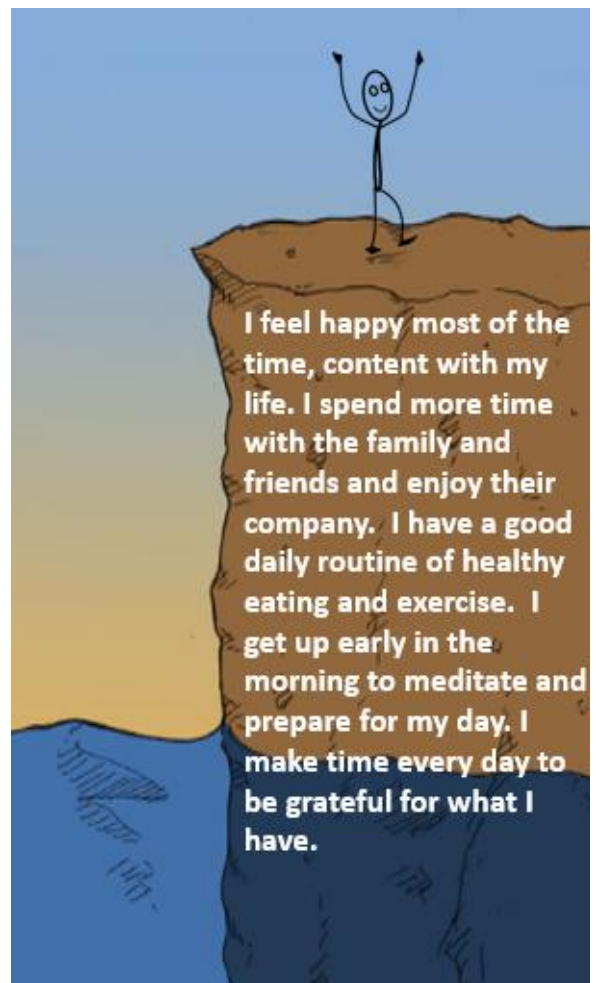
It is important to make the outcome as vivid and real as possible to the client. This can be done with the use of guided imagery.

Imagine yourself on the other side of your current problem, over there where your problem situation has been completely resolved. Notice the things you see, hear and feel that are different, now, having the outcome that you want. What does it feel like to have this (outcome)? Where do you feel it in your body?

What does it mean to you now that you have this?

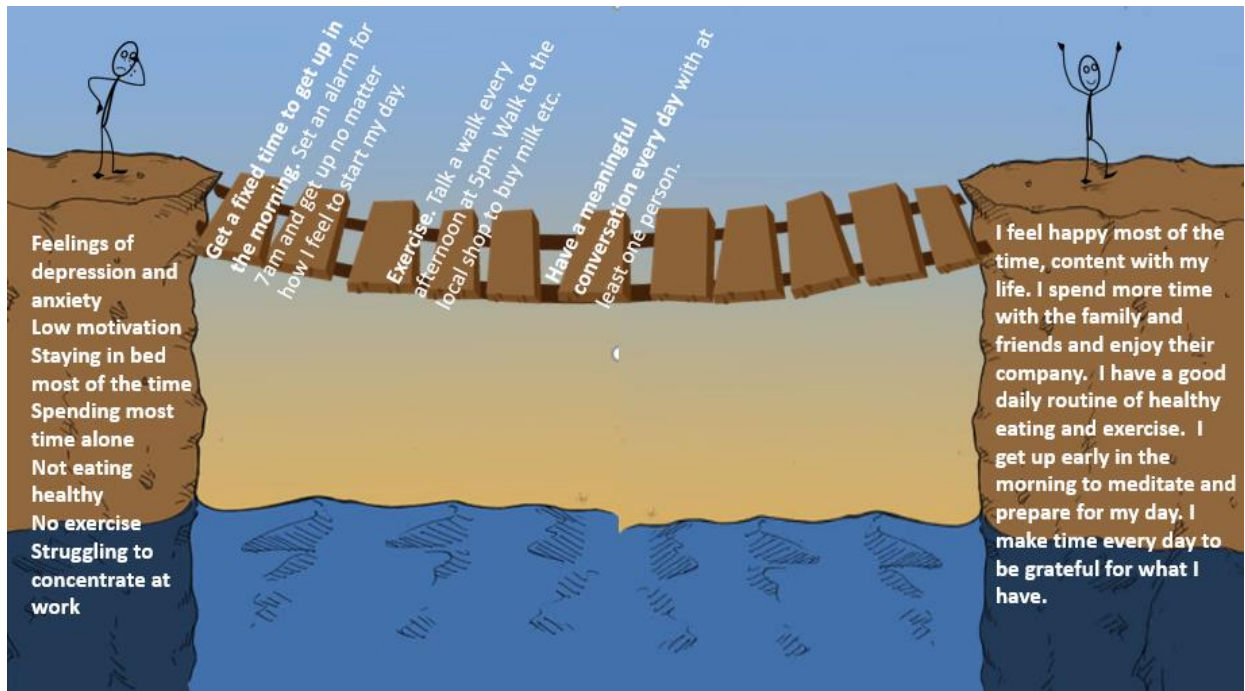
How is life differently now?

Note down the aspects of the preferred scenario that captures the essence of the client's preferred situation and desired outcome.



3. Develop action steps

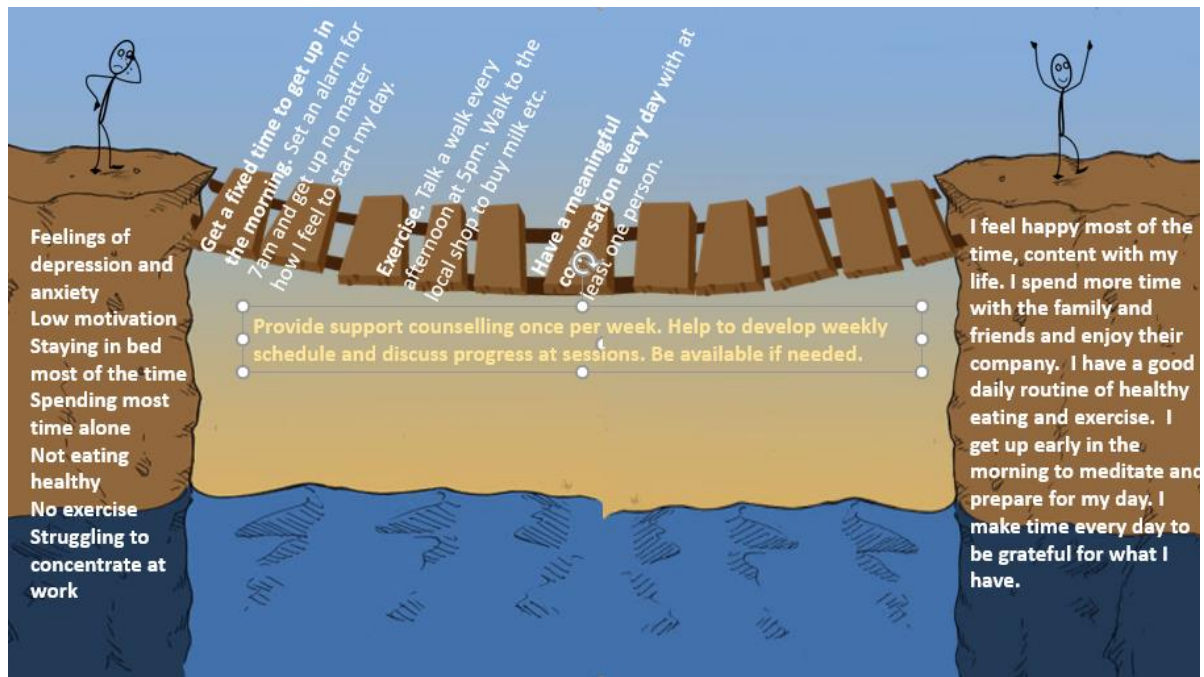
Help the client to develop action steps to move client towards the desired outcome. These are small, achievable action steps within the client's capacity to perform. These steps should involve the client directly, even if the client will need assistance to carry them out. The action steps should be carried out immediately or very soon and should be within the client's control. It should not depend on the actions of others. These should be actions that the client can carry out consistently and to which the client shows a clear commitment.



What are the things you can do, that will move you closer to your desired outcome?

4. Develop supportive actions

Supportive actions are those of the counsellor or a significant other person who is involved in and part of the planning process and who can support the client. Supportive actions may consist of general support that will enable to client to perform the agreed actions, but should preferably consist of a specific action to support each action agreed with the client for maximum effectiveness.

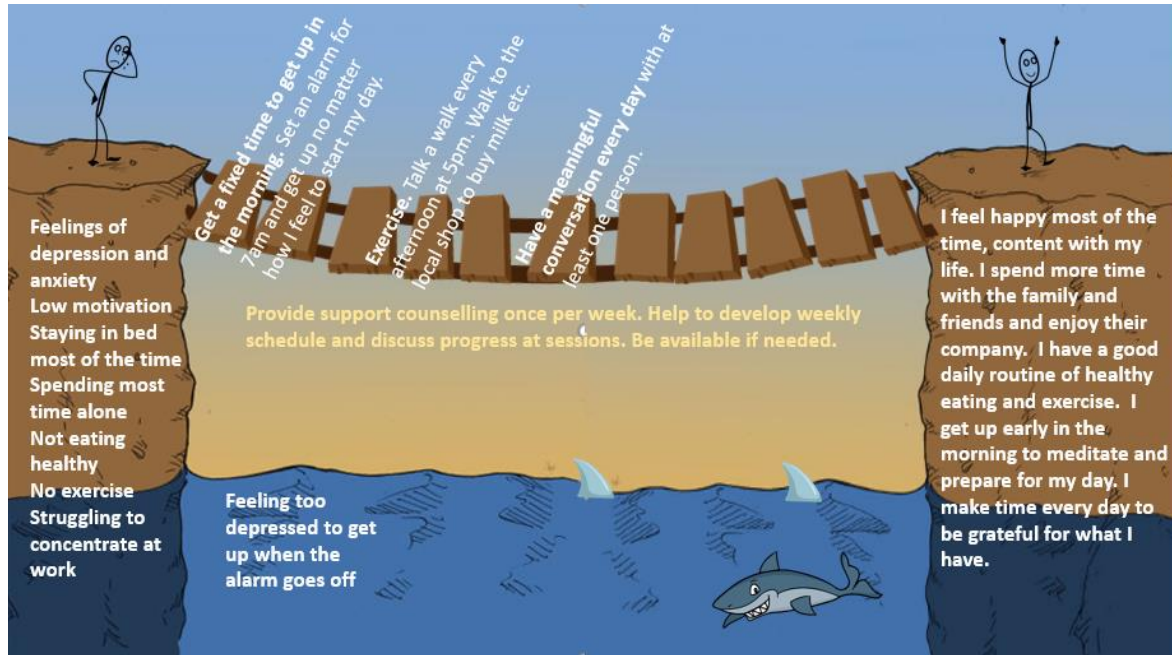


In order for you to be fully supported in carrying out these action steps, what support will you need, generally?

Being generally supported to carry out these steps, what additional support do you need, for each step or action, to ensure that you are fully capable of carrying them out?

5. Define risk factors

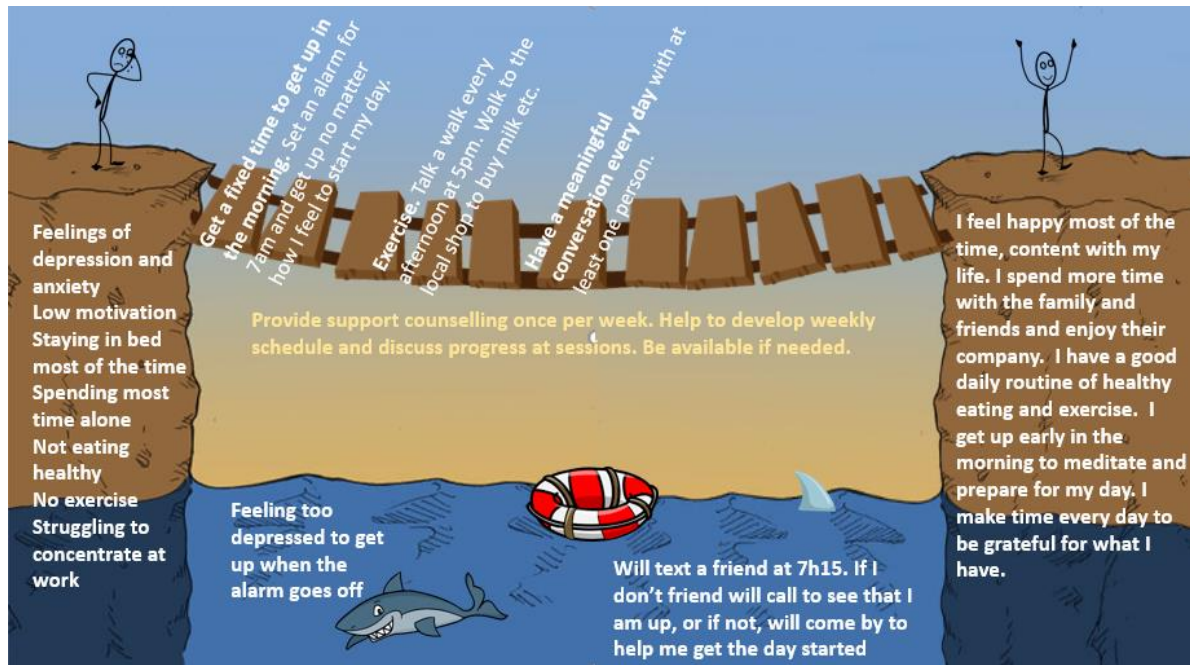
Risk factors should consist of anything that may interfere with the client carrying out the specific agreed actions. The process of identifying and mitigating risk factors is much more effective if it is specific. General risk factors may also be identified, but it is important to identify specific risks to the specific actions that the client has identified.



For each of these actions steps that you have identified, what are the likely things that could go wrong that might interfere with your intention or ability to follow through on these steps or actions?

6. Develop corrective actions

Corrective actions are intended to mitigate the risk or to be in place as an alternative in the event that the initial plan is not carried out. Once again, corrective actions must be specific to the risk identified.



It is likely that there may not be specific risks identified for every step of the action plan, but some risks should be identified.

For each of these risks identified, what support is needed to ensure you that can overcome them in the event that it (the risk) happens?

There are many examples of the use of such a metaphor on the internet, and this is my variation which I have found useful. You can adapt it any way you like – be creative. For children, it may be useful to make the process as concrete as possible, for example using Lego building blocks or letting the child draw the process. I have also used the process with families by using newsprint placed on the floor in a living room and having the family stand around the life-size “construction”. The possibilities are endless.

On the next page you will find an “empty” bridge than you can print and use.

