**Challenge**  
*Insight Stage*

**Suggested assignment:** Before completing the exercises, read chapter 12 (“Overview of the Insight Stage”) and chapter 13 (“Challenge”) in *Helping Skills*.

**Definition:** A challenge points out discrepancies, contradictions, ambivalences, defenses, irrational beliefs, or dysfunctional behaviors of which the client is unaware or is unwilling or unable to change. Challenges can illustrate conflict between a client’s words and actions, their feelings or values and their behaviors, and their ideal and real selves.

**Intentions:** To identify these maladaptive feelings, cognitions, or behaviors; to deal with resistance or denial; to promote awareness and insight

**Helpful hints:**
- Assess whether the therapeutic relationship is strong enough to withstand challenges (e.g., Does the client seem to feel safe? Does the client seem to trust you?).
- Be warm and empathic, using nonabrasive words and stating the challenge as a hunch rather than an accusation. Challenges can be powerful interventions and should be delivered with care.
- Use specific, recent behavioral examples rather than global characterizations or examples that occurred long ago.
- Observe the client’s verbal and nonverbal reactions to your challenge. Leave enough time after a challenge to talk about it and help the client learn from it and, at times, to modify it.
- Follow challenges with open questions, restatements, and reflections of feelings.

**Difficulties helpers may experience:**
- Finding ways to challenge so the client feels supported rather than attacked
- Withholding challenges when they are warranted for fear of being intrusive, offending the client, or not being liked
- Avoiding challenges because they may result in the client’s expressing negative feelings with which the helper may be uncomfortable (e.g., anger, suicidal feelings)
- Using too many challenges in one session, thus creating an adversarial atmosphere that can increase client defensiveness and resistance
- Not knowing how to respond when clients disagree with challenges

**For class discussion:** In what ways might the culture or the personality of the client influence whether and how you choose to use a challenge in a helping situation?

**Practice Exercises for Challenge**

1. **CLIENT:** I really wish I understood what’s going on in my relationship with my father. I want to get along with him and spend more time with him because he’s getting old and won’t be around for much longer. Whenever I try to call, though, I can’t think of anything to say. I never seem to get around to calling, and I feel guilty that I don’t call him more.

   **Helper response:**

2. **CLIENT:** I just got a job offer. It’s the job of my dreams—doing what I’ve always wanted to do. I can’t wait to begin. I just know that with this job, my life will be so much better than it was before.

   **Helper response:**
3. CLIENT: I got up late this morning, and everything has been going wrong. I went out to my car, and it had
a flat tire—wouldn’t you know. Everything I do goes wrong. I just can’t believe it. I might as well not
bother trying anymore because everything I touch goes bad.

Helper response:

4. CLIENT: I am so angry with Sally for her outrageous behavior at my party. She almost flung herself at all
the men the way she talked to them. She took the spotlight all night. She thinks she is so special and that
everyone should just stop and adore her. Well, I’m just sick of playing up to her all the time. It just wrecked
the party, and no one had a good time.

Helper response: