

Manfred Prior

Mini**Max** Interventions

15 simple therapeutic interventions
that have maximum impact

English language translation by Paul Bishop



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Foreword

In a famous anecdote, an American president is asked how long he needs to prepare an hour-long speech. The president declares he is ready now. The questioner is surprised and wants to know how long it will take to prepare a five-minute speech. The answer is a week. This is similar to the quotation often attributed to Goethe: 'I'm writing you a long letter because I don't have time to write a short one.'

Only those who have a lot of experience and have put a lot of time into the study of a specific topic can provide a great deal of content in a book of very few pages. Manfred Prior has studied the speech patterns of successful communication in psychotherapy, medicine, and counselling for more than 30 years. As one of the most renowned hypnosis instructors in the German-speaking world, he has taught psychotherapists, doctors, and dentists effective communication techniques and methods since the mid-eighties. In his workshops, as in this book, Manfred Prior impresses with his didactically precise teaching style, not to mention his humour and his smile.

When teaching dentists to use hypnosis I have repeatedly heard some interesting feedback: 'I do not trust myself to draw a tooth without anaesthetic or perform dental procedures under hypnosis, but since coming to these few hypnosis seminars, I have no more difficult patients.' How can this be explained?

The Formula 1 driver Emerson Fittipaldi once defined the art of racing as going as slow as possible in order to still be the fastest. In many ways, this characterises the situation of the doctor, dentist, or psychotherapist who has to fulfil the demands of their job in an ever cheaper and quicker way and live up to their ideals in the eyes of their clients and patients.

The results summarised in this book provide the basis for efficient communication as well as human encounter. The interventions help reduce resistance or – more precisely – do not let it build up. They strengthen the therapeutic relationship and build motivation and willingness to cooperate. Finally, they demonstrate time and again how a few short words can have long-lasting therapeutic consequences.

This is a valuable and entertaining book for therapists, physicians, educators, and consultants – basically for anyone who has to deal with people. Once you have read it, give it to your children. Maybe it will help them achieve a more subtle ‘handling’ of teachers and better grades in English!

Incidentally, I can recommend asking for the book back to re-read it yourself. If only because you will then realise how your children succeeded in imposing the recent increase in pocket money.

**Bernhard Trenkle, President-elect of the
International Society of Hypnosis (ISH)**

Introduction

When I was at school, I pursued many different interests. I was a very enthusiastic gymnast. I played the cello in two youth orchestras. In addition, I belonged to the local Scout troop, and I was in the youth organisation of a political party. In the evenings, once a week or so, I would sell programmes for events in the local concert hall. At the same time, however, I had the ambition of going to university. I had to somehow combine my many and varied extracurricular interests, and my part-time work, with completing the schoolwork I needed to do to get the required grades. As a result, I developed the ambition and capability to get the best possible results with the least amount of effort.

In my capacity as a psychotherapist, counsellor, and coach, I am always trying to find new possibilities, ways to improve, and workable solutions to problems through conversation. As an instructor, I aim to describe each step in the simplest possible way. In these roles I always ask myself: how can the greatest possible success be achieved with the least amount of effort?

In this book I want to offer you the results of my quest for maximum results with minimal effort. With these MiniMax interventions, it is my goal to draw to your attention communicative strategies that:

- ◆ can be used in an effective way by any practitioner of any therapeutic approach in almost any kind of session

- ◆ are hardly noticeable (and so do not provoke ‘resistance’)
- ◆ are easy to describe
- ◆ can be quickly learned by everybody

These MiniMax interventions are intended to be immediately understandable and put to good practical use.

The 15 MiniMax interventions presented in the pages that follow are aimed, first and foremost, at psychotherapists, counsellors, supervisors, coaches, and organisational consultants. These people deploy strategies that are often successful, but very complex. MiniMax interventions are aimed at those professionals who want to improve their communicative skills in a decisive, yet practical, way. These MiniMax interventions draw attention to aspects of apparently minor ‘detail’ which professionals can, regardless of their theoretical allegiance, improve in order to communicate more successfully. I will focus less on the overall strategies involved in psychotherapy, counselling, and solutions-focused conversations, and more on the niceties or finer points of linguistic communication. Taken together, these ‘details’ can deliver a special quality that leads to considerable improvements in the counselling and therapeutic process.

I am not claiming to offer something startlingly novel with these MiniMax interventions. The contexts in which the interventions are to be used are, as already mentioned, psychotherapy, counselling, supervision, coaching, and organisational consultancy. Over time, however, it will become clear that these MiniMax interventions can be used successfully in other situations too. There are no contraindications for MiniMax interventions, nor have there been any bad side effects to date. You are invited to help

discover where and how MiniMax interventions can be profitably deployed. Moreover, I am assuming that the collection of MiniMax interventions presented here is by no means complete – doubtless there remain many more to be discovered.

As an old proverb says: it is easy to make things difficult and difficult to make things easy. I would be the first to admit that it took me a lot of time to formulate these MiniMax interventions in a definitive and ever more compact way. In this respect I could sense a proximity to Goethe, who is supposed to have said, ‘I’m writing you a long letter because I don’t have time to write a short one.’ It has been worth the effort to concentrate and reduce these MiniMax interventions to what is essential about them. Over recent years they have been tried and tested over and over again. Today I take it for granted that they will automatically play an important part in my own work as a psychotherapist and counsellor. Thousands of colleagues are also using them to great success in all kinds of areas, making their work easier – and better. With the attention to detail described in these pages you too can make a huge contribution to helping clients solve their problems and reach their goals more quickly.

Thanks to their concise and comprehensible presentation, you can easily read and understand the 15 MiniMax interventions in the course of just one evening. But the more you actually use the MiniMax interventions, the more you, and your patients or clients, will feel their full benefit.

Each intervention is commented by a small, ursine reader – a cartoon bear. In an impartial way, and unburdened by any specialised knowledge of the field, he will take a close look at every MiniMax intervention and share

his insights in the form of critical commentaries. You can accompany him in his therapy and experience how he gets a handle on his problems in his own, sometimes highly idiosyncratic, way. His experiences tell their own story. Apart from MiniMax intervention 9 – ‘Step-by-step constructive questions’, which builds on MiniMax intervention 8 – ‘Constructive questions’, each intervention can stand on its own. You can determine for yourself the order in which you read each of the interventions and create your own personal pattern of MiniMax interventions, just like a mosaic.

Because the 15 MiniMax interventions are presented in a clear and concise way, you could easily read them all through in an evening and understand them. It would be better, however, not to just read this book from cover to cover in one sitting. Someone who likes chocolate blanc-mange would not eat ten bowlfuls of it in one go. Have a spoonful here and there, and enjoy the taste. Take your time to digest the information.

Let me wish you much enjoyment as you read the following pages – and many exciting discoveries as you put what they contain into practice.



This looks like a lovely book! What's it all about then? Odd title ... it'll be about problems and issues! Goodness me – psychological ones, to boot! ... Thank God I haven't got any ... Written by this bloke called Doctor Prior ... and look, here's a letter from him ... Hmm ... he wants to test the book out on me! Not blooming likely ... in front of all his readers? No chance, mate! Although – think about it, think about it – what could go wrong? And if it's all in a good cause – helping the reader understand these interventions ...? Ah right, fair enough ... but I'm not promising anything!

‘In the past ...’

In almost every therapeutic session it makes sense to periodically check that we have really understood how the patient sees and experiences a problem or symptom. Usually we do this by repeating what the patient has been saying, paraphrasing in our own words or using the patient's. Depending on your therapeutic outlook, this is called understanding, mirroring, pacing, or establishing a rapport. Suppose the patient recounts, for instance, how they often have feelings of guilt vis-à-vis their parents. It is often the case that we are thinking about things that happened in the past when we talk about weaknesses, problems, and symptoms. In the future, things can and should be different! As the therapist, you can add the small addition ‘until now’ or ‘in the past’ to your understanding of the problem, and reformulate what has been said. **‘In the past** you often had feelings of guilt vis-à-vis your parents.’ Adding this small remark, ‘in the past ...’, makes sense when talking with patients about their problems, weaknesses, or symptoms. We are trying to understand the patient precisely: **in the past** the patient often suffered from ... **in the future** they want to have found a better way, a solution, a cure. This small additional remark can help to open us up to better possibilities and solutions in the future.

In the past the value of this small turn of phrase was not always recognised. **In the past** it was rare for this seemingly casual addition to be deliberately used in

future-oriented, solution-oriented conversations about problems ...

Talk about weaknesses or symptoms using the past tense.



OK, OK – I do have a problem! What sort? ... Look here, that's none of your business ...! Look, I have a weakness for ... for ... Look, I've told you to keep your nose out, right?! And whenever I think about my, well, problem, and my weakness ... I have such terrible symptoms ... So, righty-ho, let's see if this MiniMax intervention 1 does any good at all. Let me have a go: I'm gonna sit out my little problem, together with my weakness and my symptom, just for a little bit ... until

tomorrow, how's that? Enough said? And then we'll see if there's any difference ... I should be so lucky ...

MiniMax interventions are therapeutic communication strategies designed to achieve a lot with just a few linguistic alterations: **maximum results for minimal effort.**

These tried-and-tested communication strategies can be used in an effective way by any therapeutic practitioner, in almost any kind of session. The step-by-step methods can make a huge contribution to helping patients and clients solve their problems and clarify their goals more quickly. They are easy to understand and put into practice and their profound effect will be readily observed.

Suitable for psychotherapists, counsellors, supervisors, coaches and organisational consultants. If you want to improve your communication skills in a decisive yet practical way this succinct, accessible book is for you.

MiniMax Interventions is a wonderfully concise and clear toolbox of verbal interventions.

**Stephen Lankton, Editor, *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis*,
Fellow, American Society of Clinical Hypnosis**

This book offers a clear path to being a more effective therapist or coach.

Jeffrey K. Zeig, PhD, The Milton Erickson Foundation

A wonderful reference tool that all therapists will dip into on a regular basis within their practice.

Melanie Phillips, Cognitive Hypnotherapist, Lothian Therapy

The book, originally published in German as the bestselling *MiniMax-Interventionen: 15 minimale Interventionen mit maximaler Wirkung*, is translated by Professor Paul Bishop.

In his native Germany, **Manfred Prior** is a popular and well-known trainer in the use of precise language in hypnotherapy and counselling. In his capacity as a psychotherapist, counsellor and coach, he is always trying to find new possibilities, ways to improve and workable solutions. Fundamentally, Manfred Prior is interested in how people can achieve the greatest possible success from the least amount of effort.

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