



**Brief
Therapy
Institute
of
Sydney**



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The power of description: BEYOND the miracle question

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At your best

Let's imagine that you wake up on the morning of the exam (the interview, the performance, the challenge ...) and you just know that you are at your best, what's the first thing you would notice?

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Detailed description of the
“at your best” day

The detail of description

During the interview [the client] is asked to describe both her inner states and the outer actions which signify these states. She is asked to locate herself at specific places and specific times and attention is paid to the most humdrum details such as the period during which her computer turns on or sitting on a train. She is asked to think about what this will look like to others ... including her dog, and how these others might respond.

Strategic therapy

In strategic family therapy ... and the MRI brief therapy approach ... the therapy session led to “THE intervention”, which was seen as the major trigger for change.

This emphasis was reflected in early SFBT.

However, even in the early days of SFBT, Eve Lipchik was talking about the interview being the intervention.

Solution Focused Brief Therapy session

1. How will you know that this session has been useful?
2. Miracle question (20 minutes — rich detail)
3. Instances of the miracle that have already happened
4. Scaling progress towards the miracle
5. Compliments, summary, suggestions

Solution Focused Brief Therapy description

1. How will you know that this session has been useful?
2. Let's imagine that happens
3. Detailed description (40 minutes)

The “at your best” conversation

What we have learned is that just the description, just inviting the client to imagine, in detail of course, is normally enough. We do not have to ‘action plan’ if we can just trust the client and if we can just trust the process. The description by itself seems to do the job. . . . As clients describe their preferred futures the question helps us to invite the client into a second layer of detail and description, moving beyond the facts of the day.

The goal of the therapy is changed here. The therapist is not seeking to gather information to devise interventions. Rather, the therapist's role is to help the client expand the details of their descriptions, which then become more and more littered with tiny specifics which might easily suggest themselves as actions for the client.

Action language

In MRI brief therapy and classic SFBT —

- Detailed, concrete, specific information
- The therapist has to LISTEN in order to
 - discern patterns to be interrupted (MRI)
 - discover possible exceptions to be expanded (SFBT)

in order to design an intervention that will promote change

Description language

In what McKergow (2016) calls “SFBT 2.0” —

- Detailed, concrete, specific information (again)
- The therapist has to LISTEN in order to —
 - ask questions that encourage more rich detail
 - ask questions that invite the client to experience this difference

No need to design an intervention; the description IS the intervention!

So, the role of therapist changes from a sorter-of-detail (to figure out the relevant details for intervention design) into an expander-of-detail (to help the client immerse themselves in their descriptions of better futures, pasts and presents).

In order to build descriptions, we need to know at some level what these descriptions are to be about. A problem statement is not useful for this (other than as a stepping stone), so we need to know what the client is seeking; ‘Where do you want to go?’, as opposed to ‘Where have you been?’. These three elements are based on the assumption that every client, including those mandated to attend, have a good reason – a desired outcome – for being there.

1. What are your best hopes from our work together? (The 'contract' or what ... Korman (2004) refers to as the 'Common Project')
2. How will you know that these hopes are being realised? (The client's preferred future)
3. What are you already doing that might contribute to your hopes being realised? (The history of the preferred future in the past and present)

Three-part intersectional sequences

When there is a sign of change or progress (which might be a behaviour, a thought or a feeling), the practitioner helps the client to build the sequence by asking about:

- what others would notice or have noticed (depending on whether it's a future or past sign);
- what those others would do or have done differently as a result;
- and the impact of this on the client – how would/did they respond to that?

Adding detail

- What difference would that make?
- What difference would that make to person [Y]?
- What would be the first tiny signs that [thing M] was happening?
- Who else would notice [thing M] was happening?
- What would they notice?
- What would person [Y] do when they noticed you doing [thing M]?
- What would you do in response to that?
- What else?
- What happens/happened next?

As therapists became more skilled at eliciting descriptions of possible futures and the histories that could support them they also became more aware of their own insignificance: well-meaning interventions like tasks and even encouragement looked more like intrusions, interrupting rather than assisting the client's progress.

Ending the session – no tasks or actions, more appreciative summarising

We have just seen that the end of the session has lost many of the trappings which used to be taken as read in the early days. There is no ritual of break, compliments, tasks.

However, we have to bring things to a close in some way.

Appreciative summarising by the practitioner can usefully be done here – it shows you've been listening and offers the client the chance to hear some of the things they've been saying again, perhaps in a different order.

DON'T encourage any action!

What is crucial is that the therapist remain neutral about any future steps the client might choose to take. Any attempt, however subtle, to direct the client towards action is likely to be experienced as a form of expropriation: using the client's ideas to feed the (good) intentions of the therapist. Only by staying with description can this neutrality be maintained and the client be left fully in charge of her life. Similarly, the therapist is not out to create an emotional experience, to make this an aim would be to assume that this is right for the client.

A Performance Conversation

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COACH What are your best hopes
from this session?

CLIENT I am very worried about
tomorrow's board meeting – I'm
not sure I can handle all the
issues I really need be at my best.

Being at your best

COACH Let's imagine you wake up tomorrow and find that you are at your best, ready for whatever the day brings.

What might be the first thing you notice as you wake up that begins to tell you that this is a day when you are at your best?

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What time do you wake up?
Is it an alarm or do you wake up naturally?

What might be the first thing you notice as the alarm goes off?

What difference might that make to how you get up?

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What might be the first sign to your partner?

How will you know that she likes you cuddling her in that way?

What difference do you imagine starting like that will make to your day?

How will your partner know that you are feeling more hopeful and optimistic?

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How will you know the miracle has happened as you are walking upstairs with the tea?

What might you notice about yourself as you are making the tea?

How would your partner know that you are thinking about her in that way?

How will you know that she appreciates that?

And if she does that how might you respond?

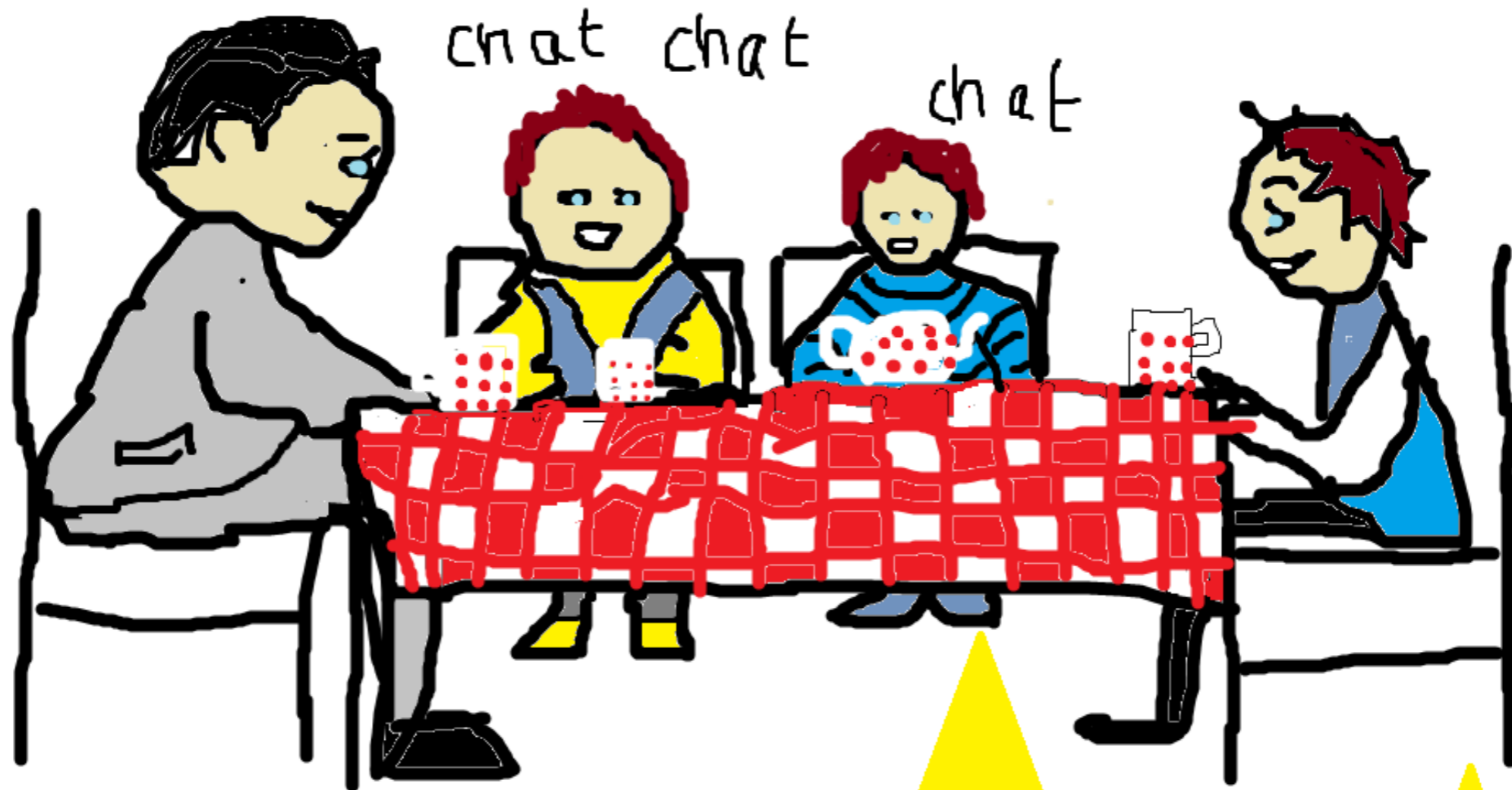


Which of your children will you see first?
Where is that likely to be?
What will be the first thing he notices about you?

How might he respond?
And how might you respond to that?

And what might be the first thing your daughter notices about you?

What will you enjoy about this?
How will the children know you are enjoying them?



What might you be talking about?

What might you be noticing about the children?

What might you notice different at breakfast?

Who might be talking to who?

What might the children be noticing about their parents?

What will you notice about yourself as you get ready to leave for work?

How might your children notice that you are thinking about their day as well as your own?

What might your partner notice about the way you say goodbye?

How do you think your partner would respond?

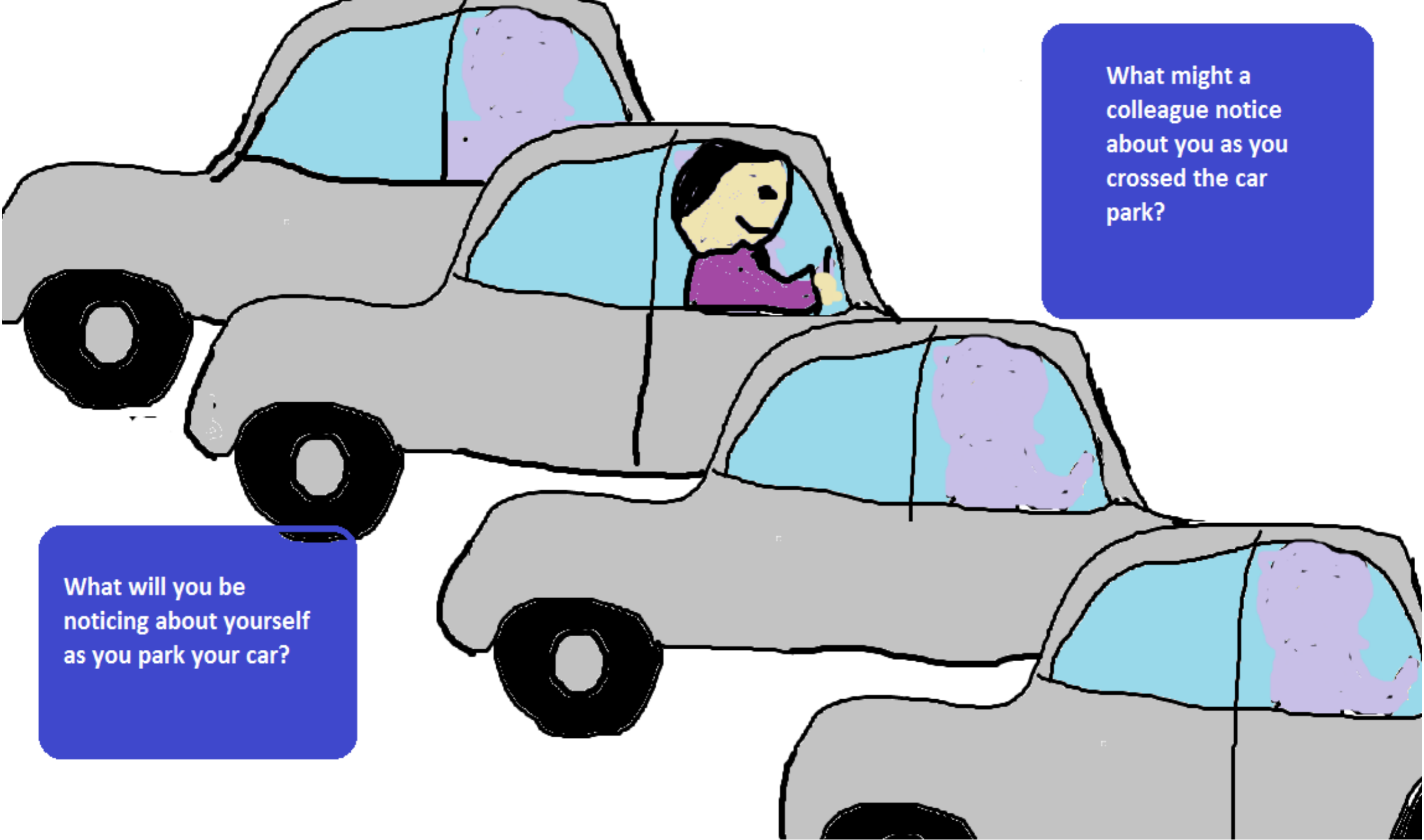




What might you notice about the way you got into your car on a morning like this?

What might other drivers be noticing about you even though they didn't know?

What might you be thinking about work and the day ahead if your morning had started like this?



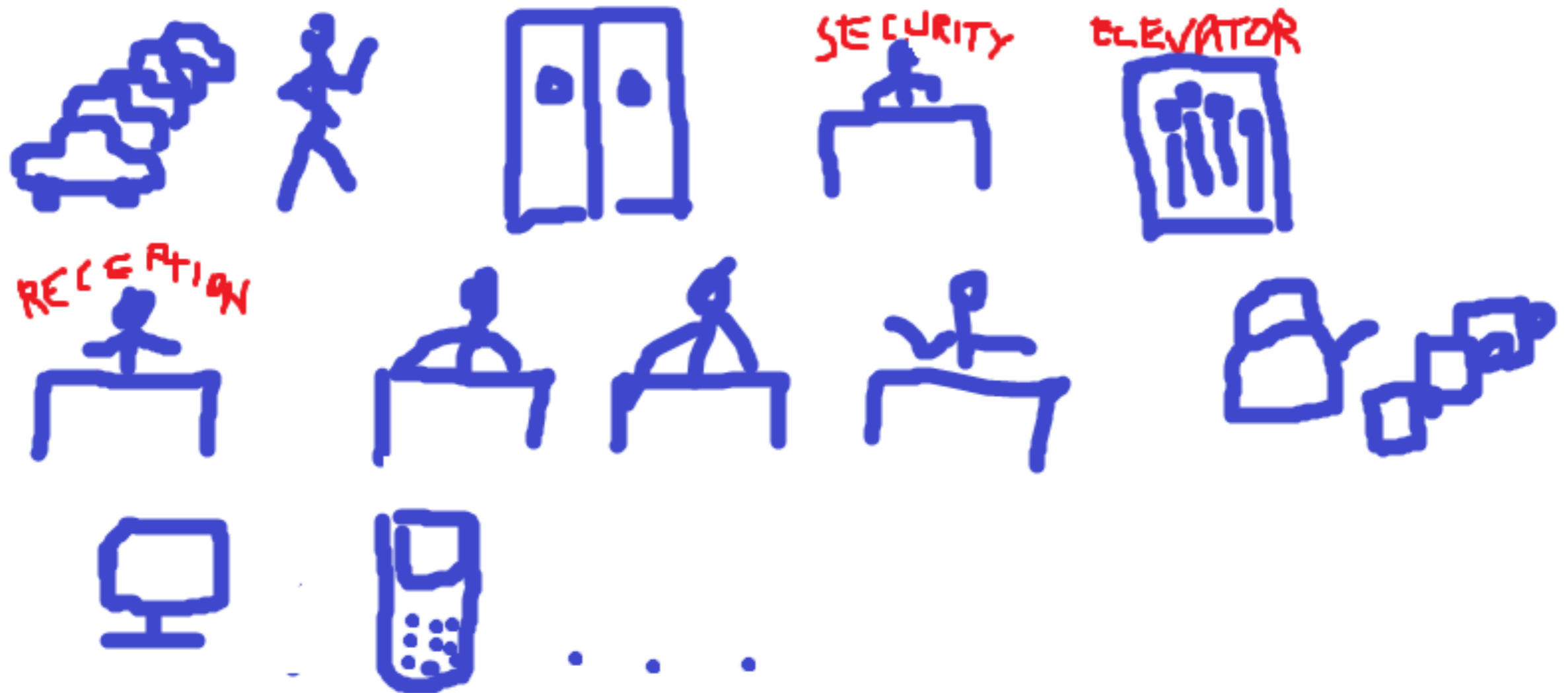
What might a colleague notice about you as you crossed the car park?

What will you be noticing about yourself as you park your car?

This is such a slow and difficult task I'm going to take a short cut! In the real session each point in the picture was described. The most important part of each description was the interactions between the client and each of the (named) 'witnesses' of his behaviour.

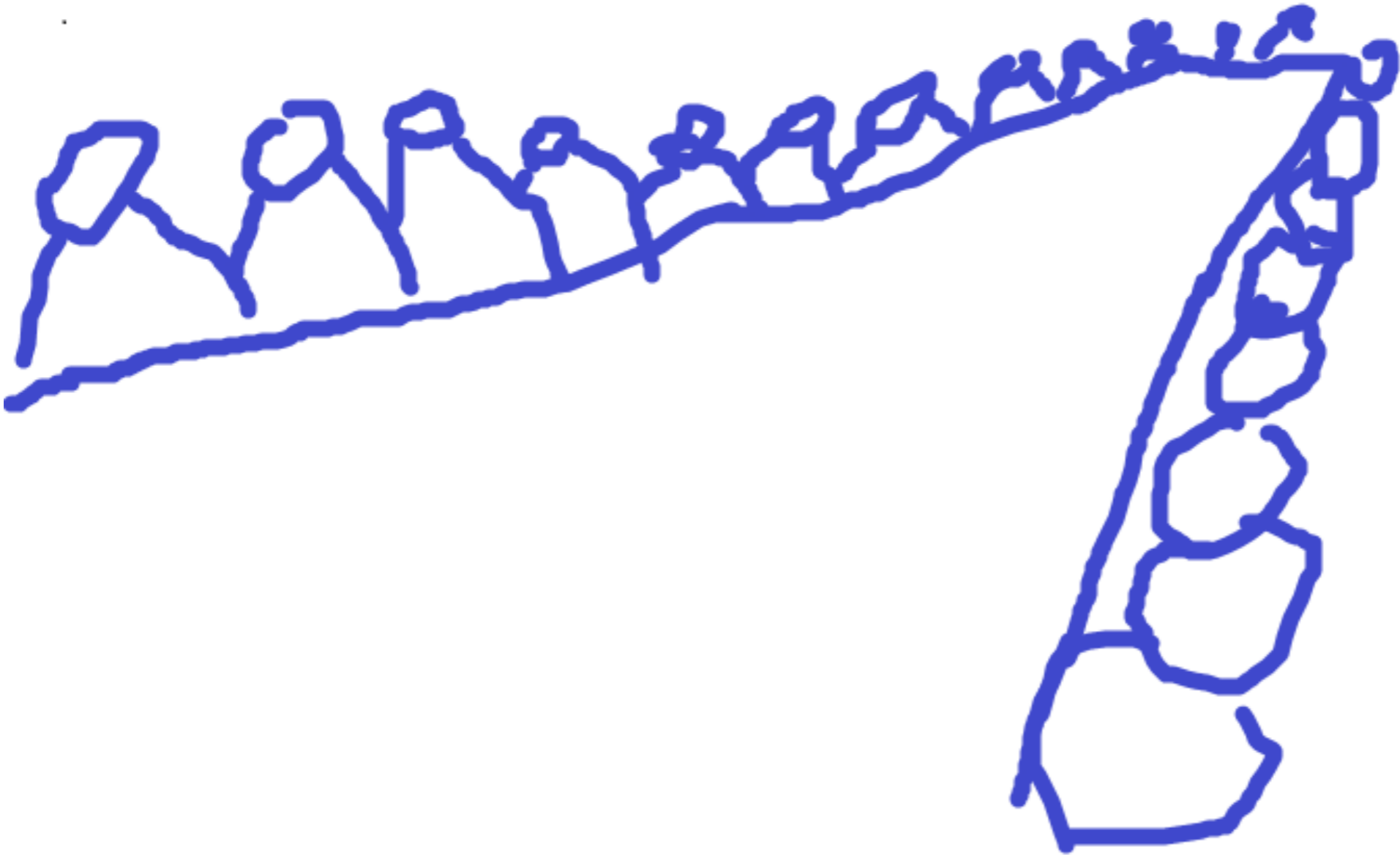
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The Board!!!!





Ready for anything!

At your best!

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The session stopped here with the coach trusting that he would know best what to do and being at his best he was likely to produce the best performance.

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