



REFRAMING THE “DIFFICULT” CLIENT

REFLECTING ON ATTITUDES AND
BELIEFS

Mya Haley



DISCUSSION OBJECTIVES



01.

Understand the impact of labels, particularly for those whom we work with and provide services to.

03.

Consider engagement and relationship building from a mutuality standpoint.

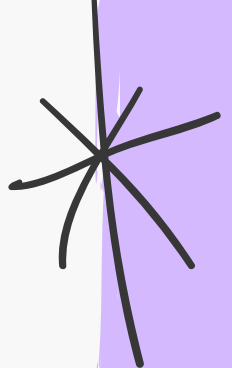
02.

Reflect on the positions held, the power that comes with it and what it can mean for those we work with.

04.

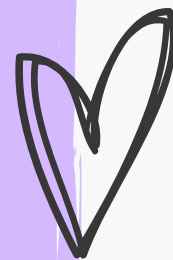
Re-connect to the work through shared reflection of humanity and dignity.

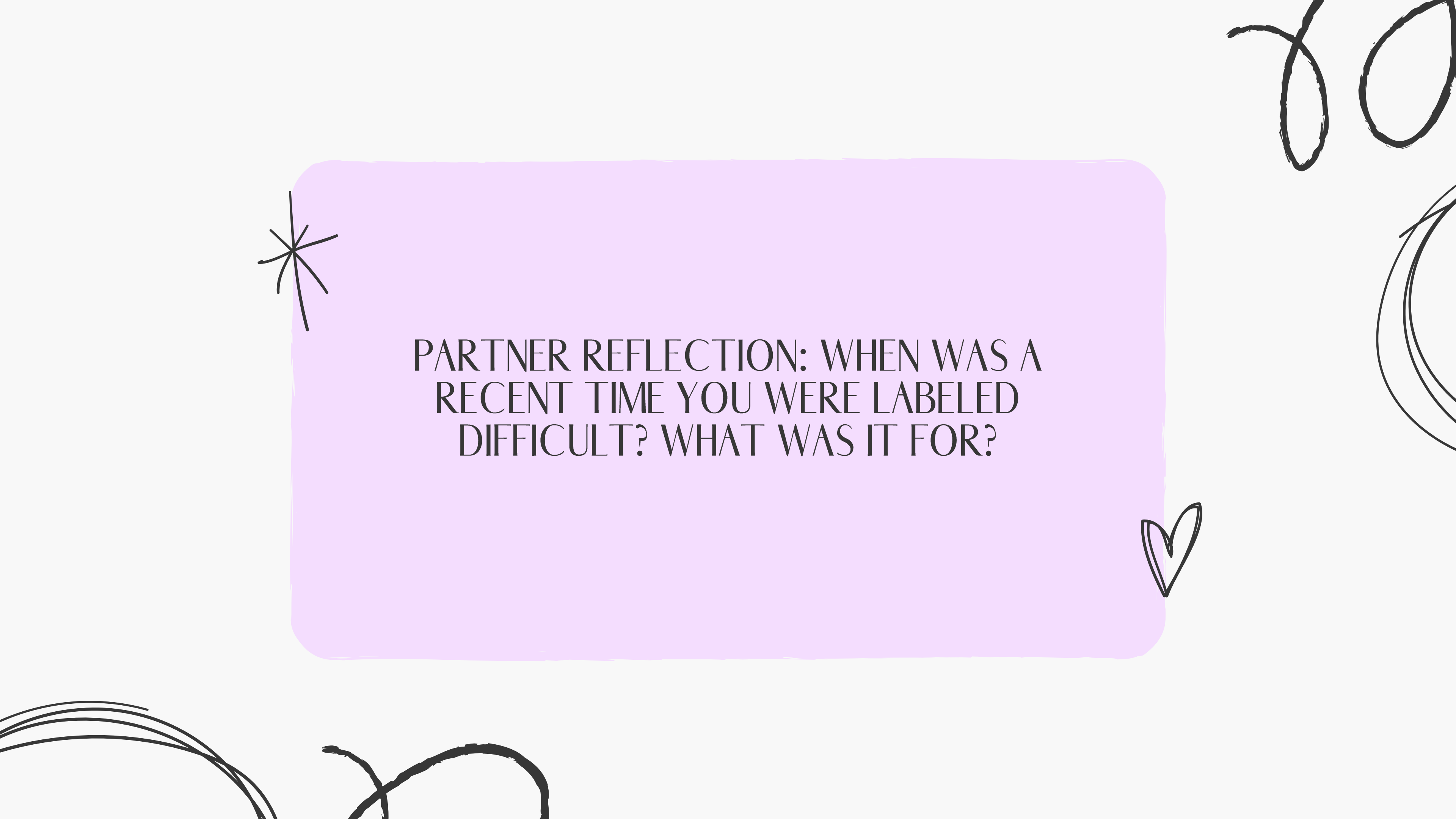
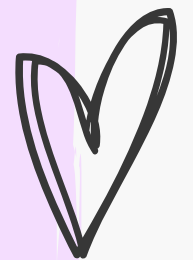
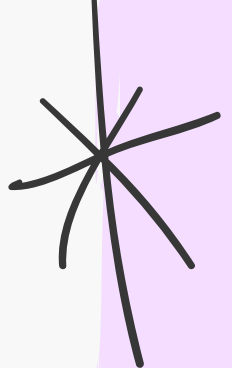




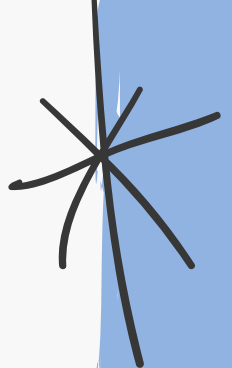
PARTNER INTRODUCTION:
NAME, ROLE ON TEAM, WHERE YOU
WERE RAISED, YOUR FAVORITE COLOR.

IF ANIMALS COULD TALK, WHICH
WOULD YOU MOST WANT TO HAVE A
CONVERSATION WITH? WHY?





PARTNER REFLECTION: WHEN WAS A
RECENT TIME YOU WERE LABELED
DIFFICULT? WHAT WAS IT FOR?



PARTNER REFLECTION: WHERE DOES
BEING LABELED AS “DIFFICULT” HOLD
THE MOST WEIGHT FOR YOU? WHY?

WHY IS THIS TOPIC IMPORTANT?

OI

Labeling our clients as “difficult” can become a barrier to services. What we say is a reflection of our beliefs and a glimpse into possible practice shortcomings.

WHY IS THIS TOPIC IMPORTANT?

01

Labeling our clients as “difficult” can become a barrier to services. What we say is a reflection of our beliefs and a glimpse into possible practice shortcomings.

02

There is a need to pardon our heart; our responsibilities as “insiders” is to ensure we don’t further isolate/ become part of someone’s internalized story.

WHY IS THIS TOPIC IMPORTANT?

01

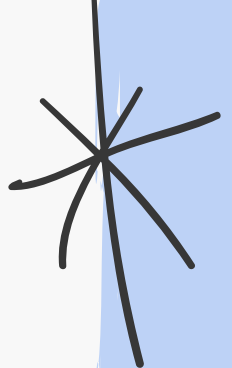
Labeling our clients as “difficult” can become a barrier to services. What we say is a reflection of our beliefs and a glimpse into possible practice shortcomings.

02

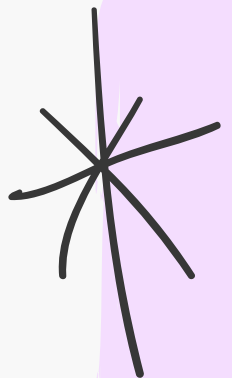
There is a need to pardon our heart; our responsibilities as “insiders” is to ensure we don’t further isolate/ become part of someone’s internalized story.

03

Because sometimes the system itself drives the difficulties and challenges but we play that frustration out with each other and with participants.



WHAT MAKES A CLIENT
“DIFFICULT”?



WHAT ARE THE
CONDITIONS THAT
CAN CREATE A
“DIFFICULT” CLIENT?



01

Fear and vulnerability

- Underlying anxiety
- Past trauma
- Current stressors

04

Identity Preservation

- Expertise in self
- Reconciling survival with labels, relationships, understanding

02

Involuntary participation

- Court mandates
- Familial pressures
- Previous treatment coercion

05

The “unknown”

- Unclear communication in prior treatment
- Not given the dignity of transparency
- Being able to only take one step at a time

03

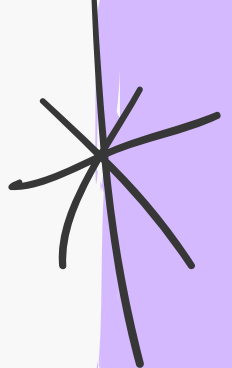
Culture

- Different ideology about mental health/ substance use
- Difference between family/ natural support understanding vs. participant understanding

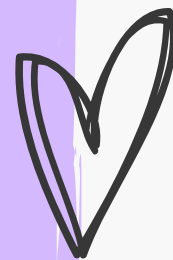
06

Self-determination/ control

Exercising free-will and autonomy where possible



WHAT TYPES OF
POWER DYNAMICS CAN
CONTRIBUTE TO A
CLIENT BEING SEEN AS
"DIFFICULT"?



01

Systemic needs

04

Coersive systems

02

Provider burnout

05

Provider micromangement

03

Familial/ upbringing

06

Lack of provider insight + power

“This client is needy.”
“Why do you always need
something?”
“They think they run things.”

WHAT WE
SAY/WHAT
GETS SAID

“DEMANDING”
CLIENTS

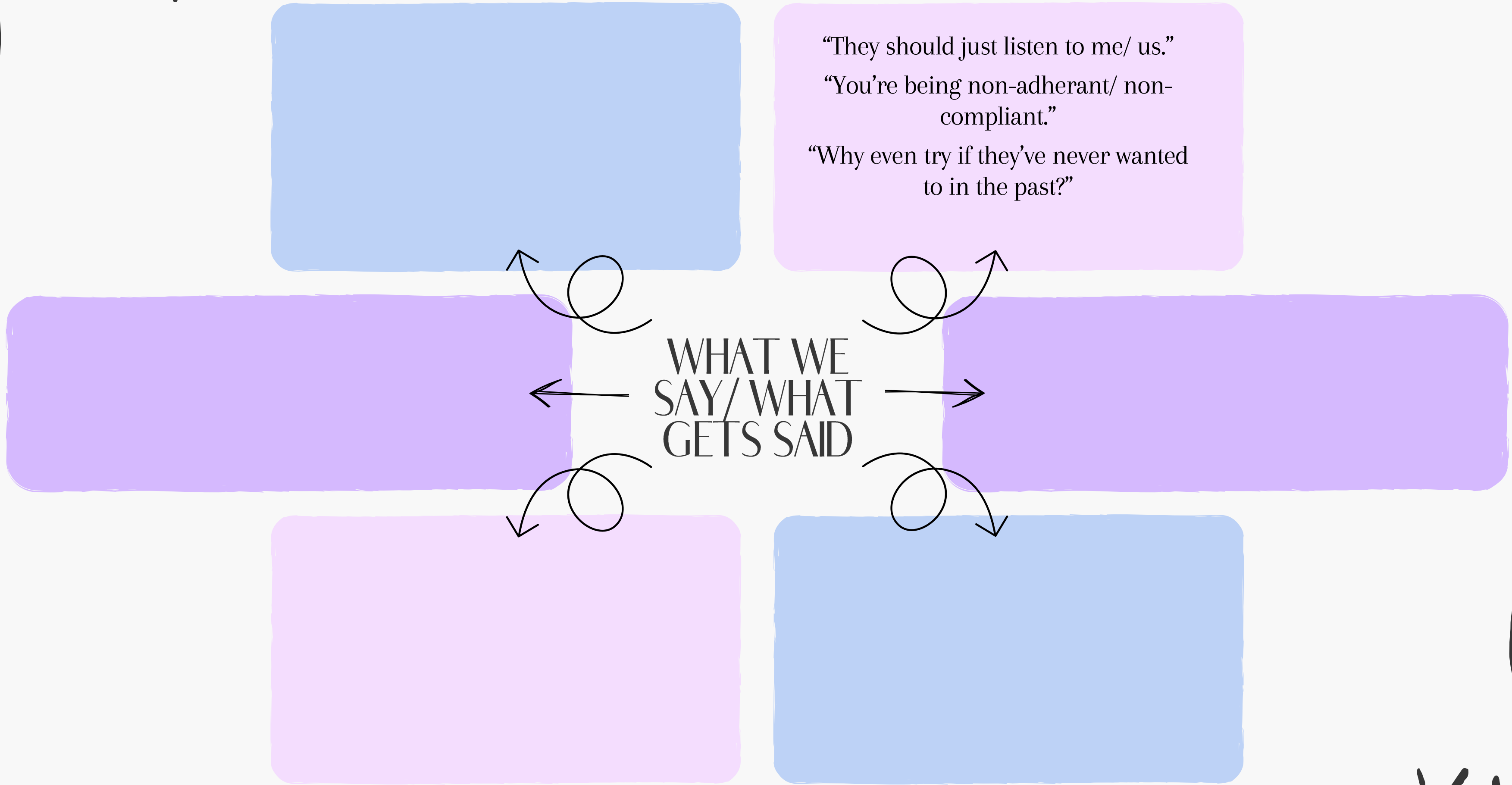
HOW MIGHT
WE LABEL
CLIENTS



SOMEONE WHO KNOWS WHAT
THEY WANT

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND BEING
TOLD THEY CAN'T - EXPLICITLY OR
OTHERWISE

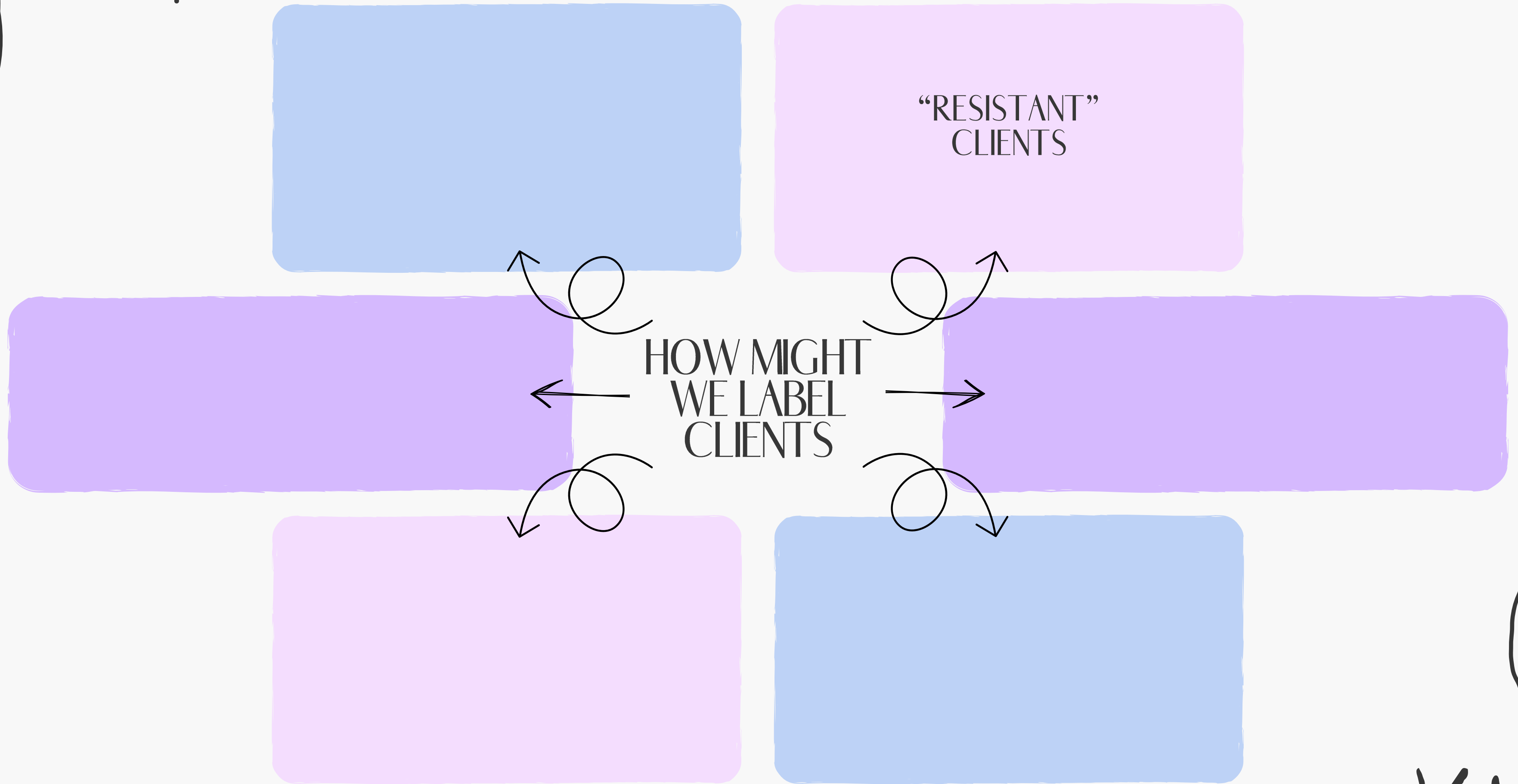
TIPS FOR
POTENTIAL
REFRAMING



“They should just listen to me/ us.”

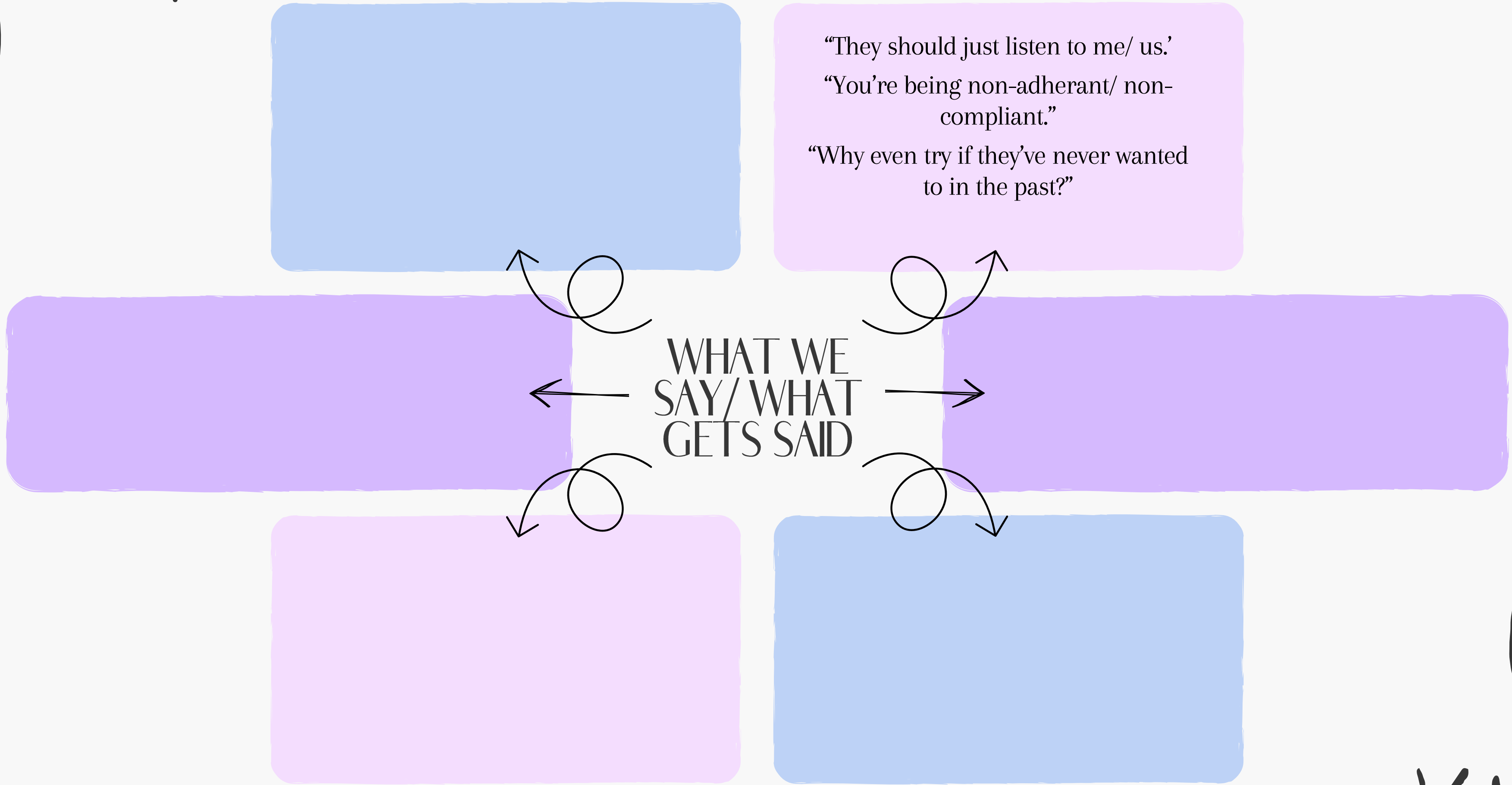
“You’re being non-adherent/ non-compliant.”

“Why even try if they’ve never wanted to in the past?”



"RESISTANT"
CLIENTS

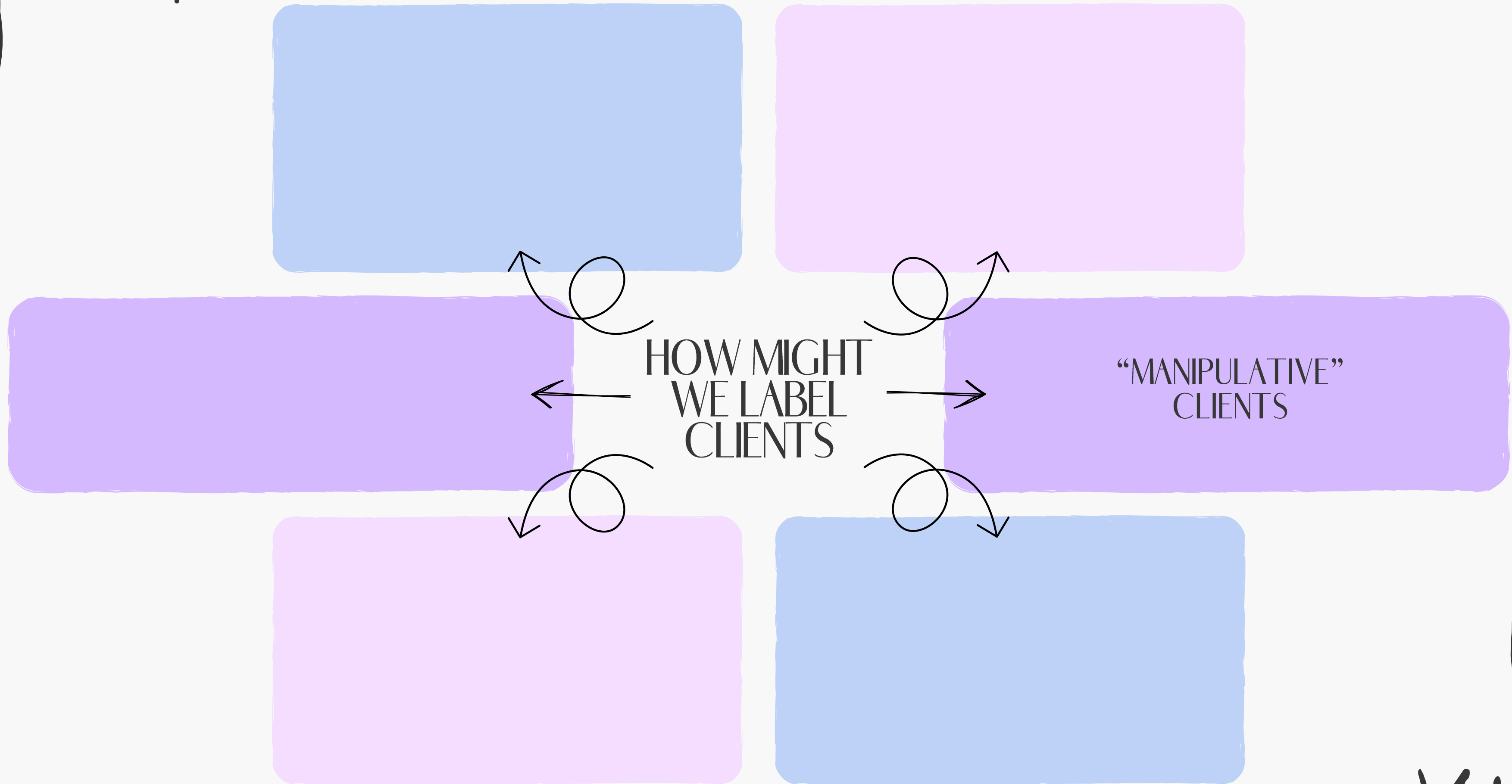
HOW MIGHT
WE LABEL
CLIENTS

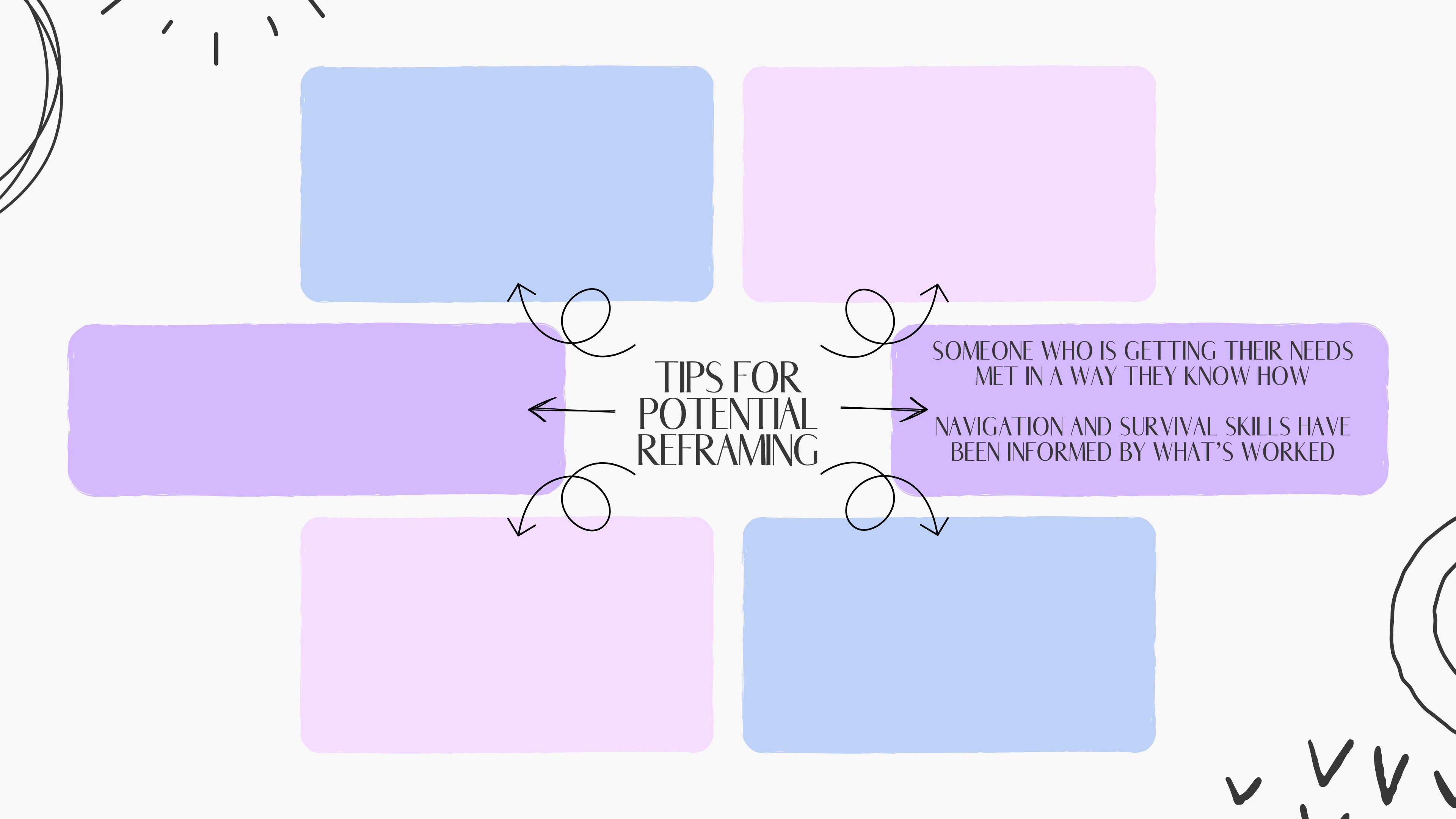


“They should just listen to me/ us.”
“You’re being non-adherent/ non-compliant.”
“Why even try if they’ve never wanted to in the past?”

WHAT WE
SAY/WHAT
GETS SAID

“They’re being manipulative.”
“I will not be manipulated.”
“They’re trying to pull one over on you.”





A hand-drawn style mind map on a light gray background. The central node is the text "TIPS FOR POTENTIAL REFRAMING". Four arrows point outwards from this center to four empty rectangular boxes: a blue box at the top-left, a pink box at the top-right, a pink box at the bottom-left, and a blue box at the bottom-right. The right side of the diagram features a purple rectangular box containing two lines of text. The background is decorated with faint, hand-drawn elements: a spiral in the top-left, some dashed lines at the top, and checkmarks and a partial circle in the bottom-right.

TIPS FOR POTENTIAL REFRAMING

SOMEONE WHO IS GETTING THEIR NEEDS
MET IN A WAY THEY KNOW HOW

NAVIGATION AND SURVIVAL SKILLS HAVE
BEEN INFORMED BY WHAT'S WORKED

WHAT WE
SAY/WHAT
GETS SAID

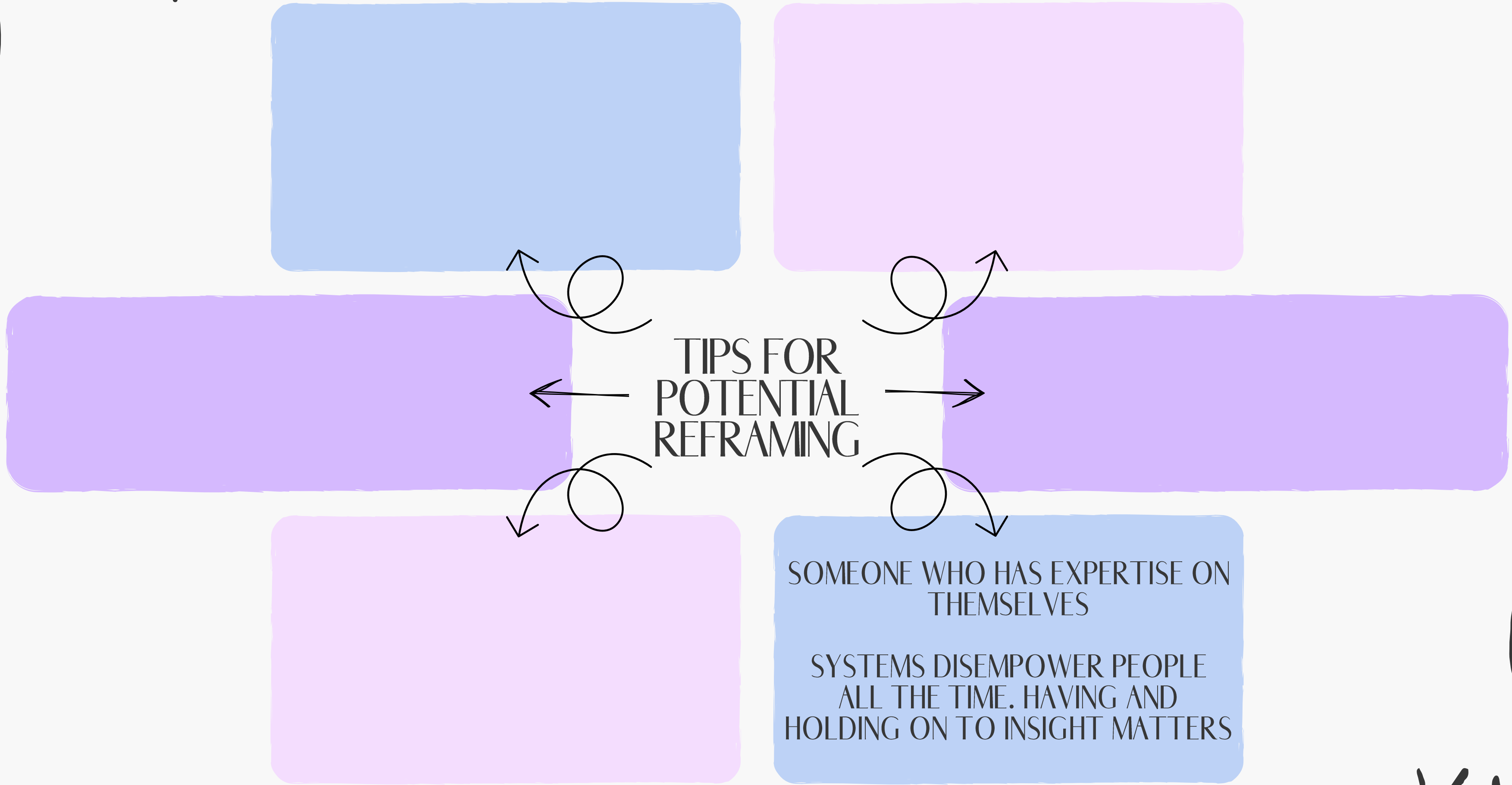
“They think they know better than me”

“I went to school for this so I think I
know more about it.”

“You can’t tell them anything.”

HOW MIGHT
WE LABEL
CLIENTS

“KNOWLEDGABLE” /
“KNOW-IT-ALL”
CLIENTS



A hand-drawn style mind map diagram. At the center is the text "TIPS FOR POTENTIAL REFRAMING". Four arrows point outwards from this center to four empty rectangular boxes with rounded corners. The boxes are colored: top-left is light blue, top-right is light pink, bottom-left is light pink, and bottom-right is light blue. There are also some decorative scribbles in the corners of the page.

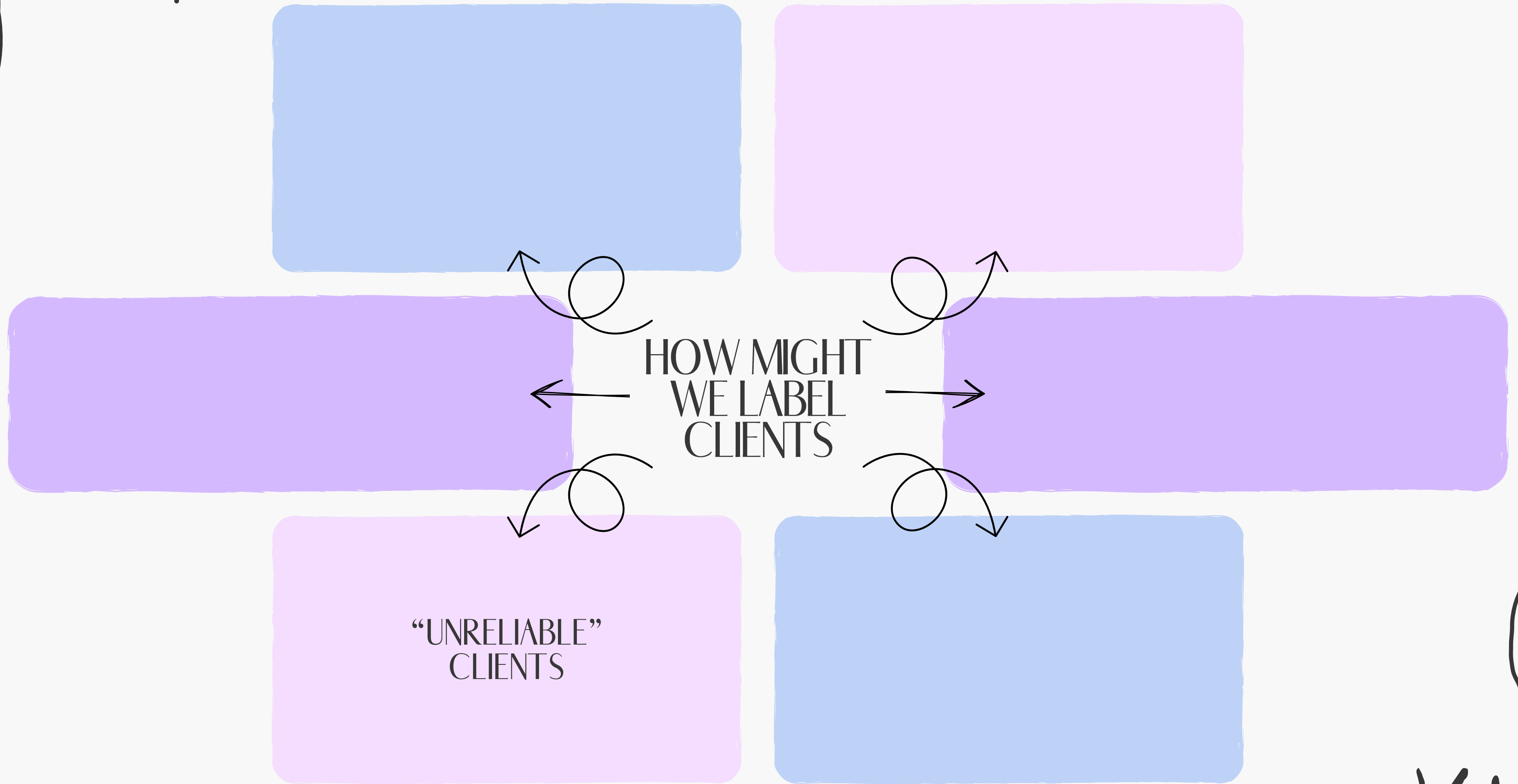
TIPS FOR POTENTIAL REFRAMING

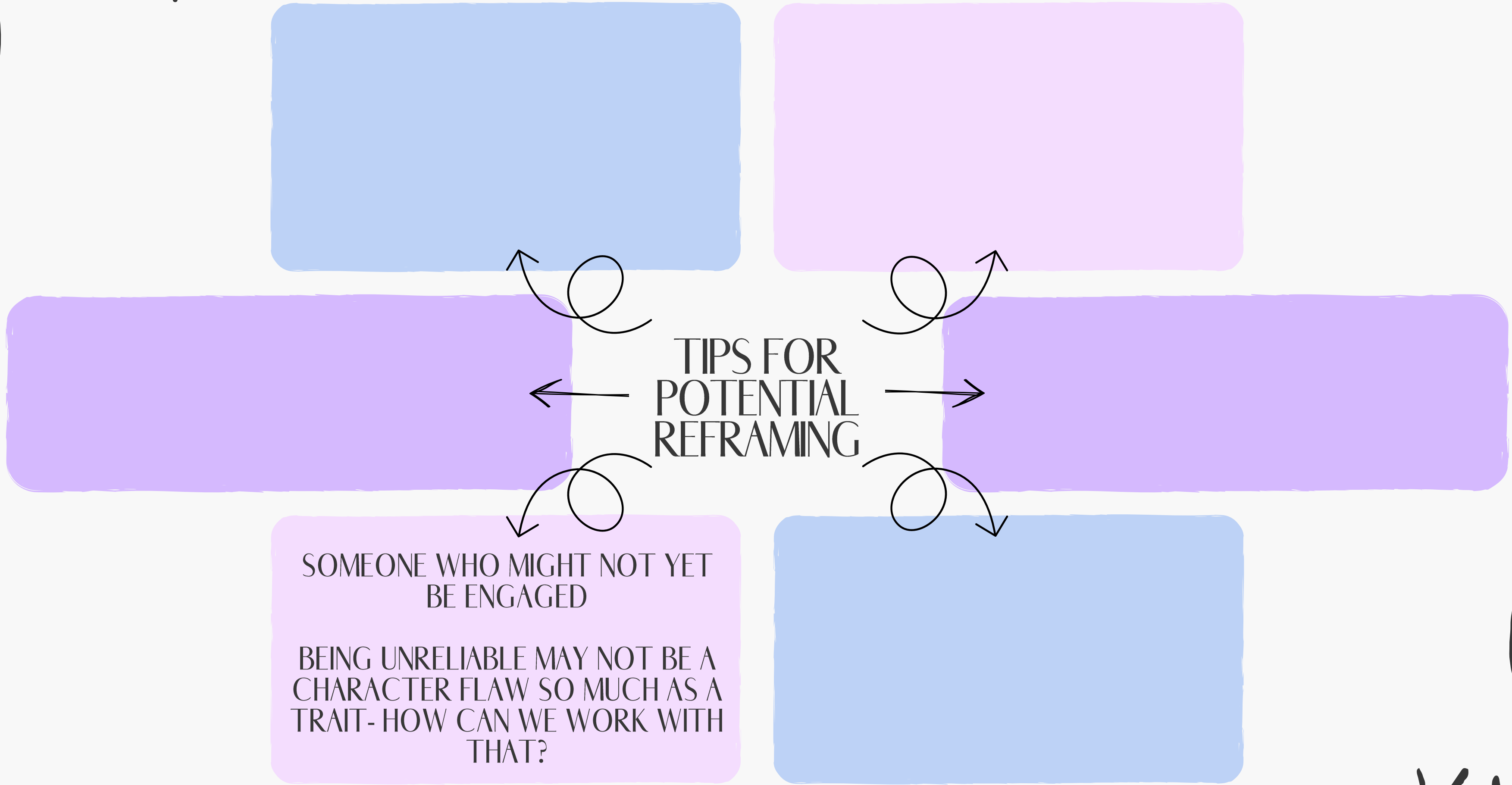
SOMEONE WHO HAS EXPERTISE ON
THEMSELVES

SYSTEMS DISEMPOWER PEOPLE
ALL THE TIME. HAVING AND
HOLDING ON TO INSIGHT MATTERS

WHAT WE
SAY/WHAT
GETS SAID

“They never show up for this.”
“You better do A or I won’t do B.”
“You’re better off not getting your
hopes up with that one.”



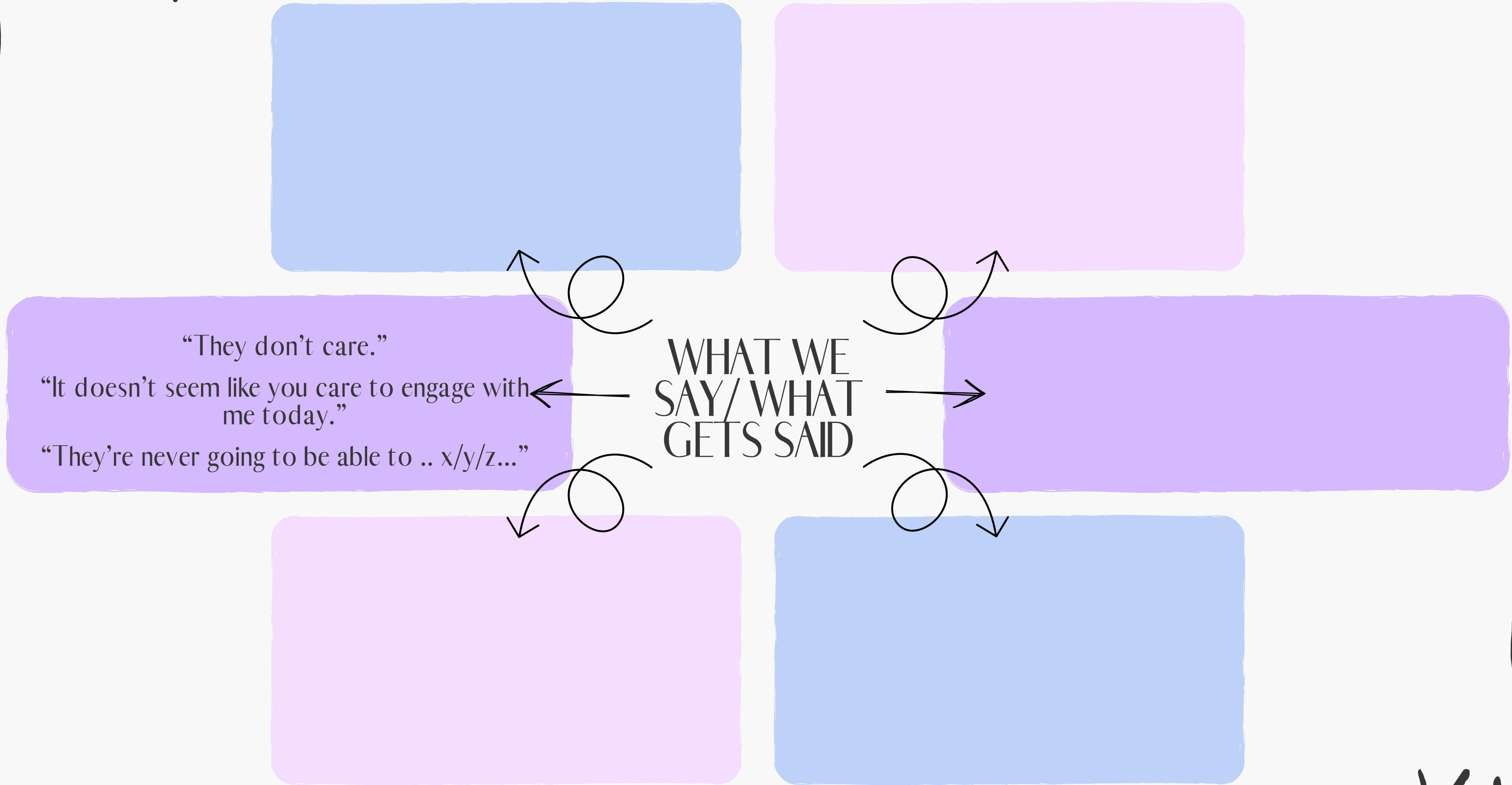


A mind map diagram with a central title 'TIPS FOR POTENTIAL REFRAMING'. Six empty colored boxes are arranged around the center: two blue boxes at the top, two purple boxes on the sides, and two pink boxes at the bottom. Hand-drawn arrows point from the central text to each of the six boxes. There are also some decorative scribbles in the corners of the page.

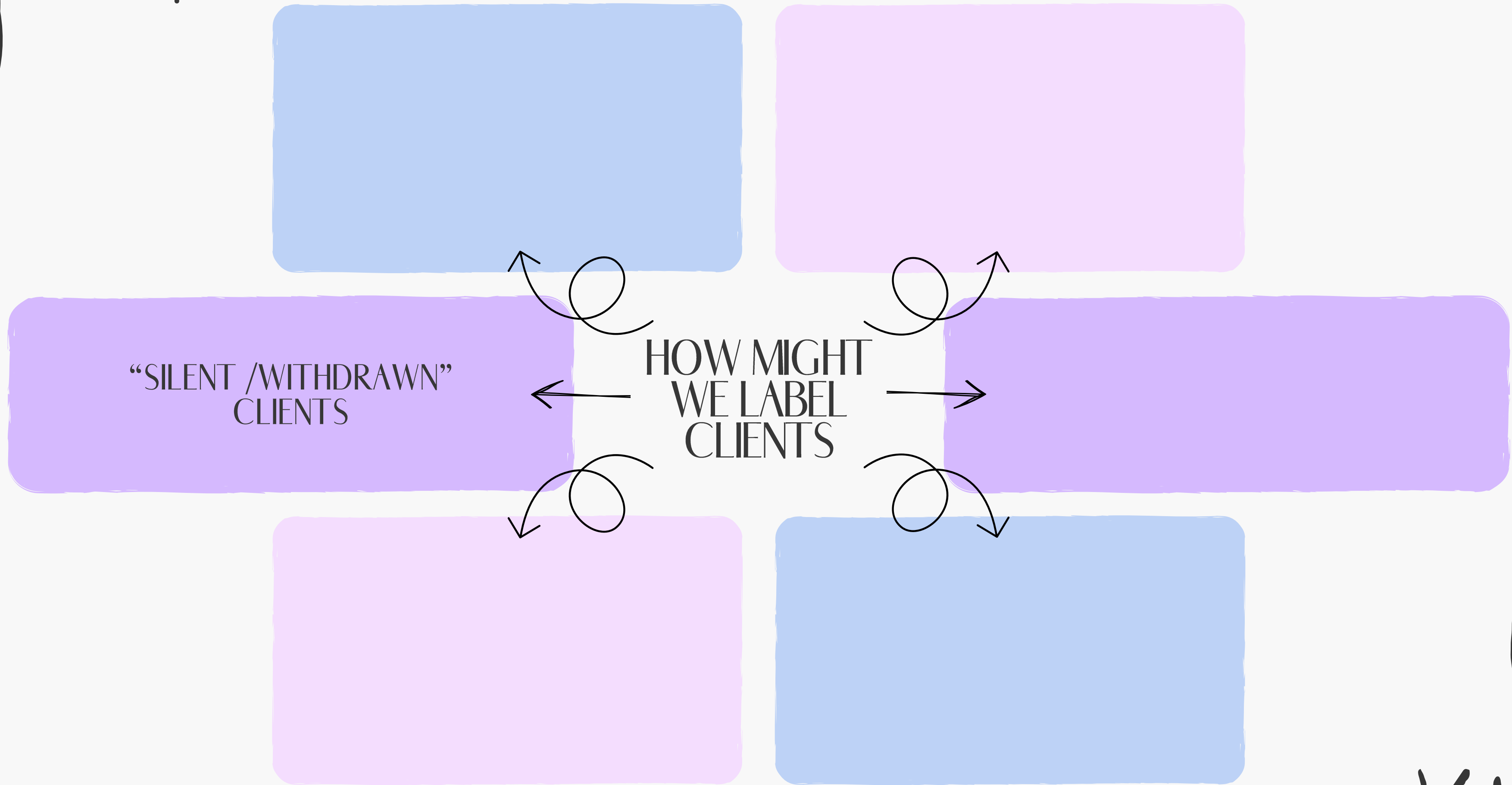
TIPS FOR POTENTIAL REFRAMING

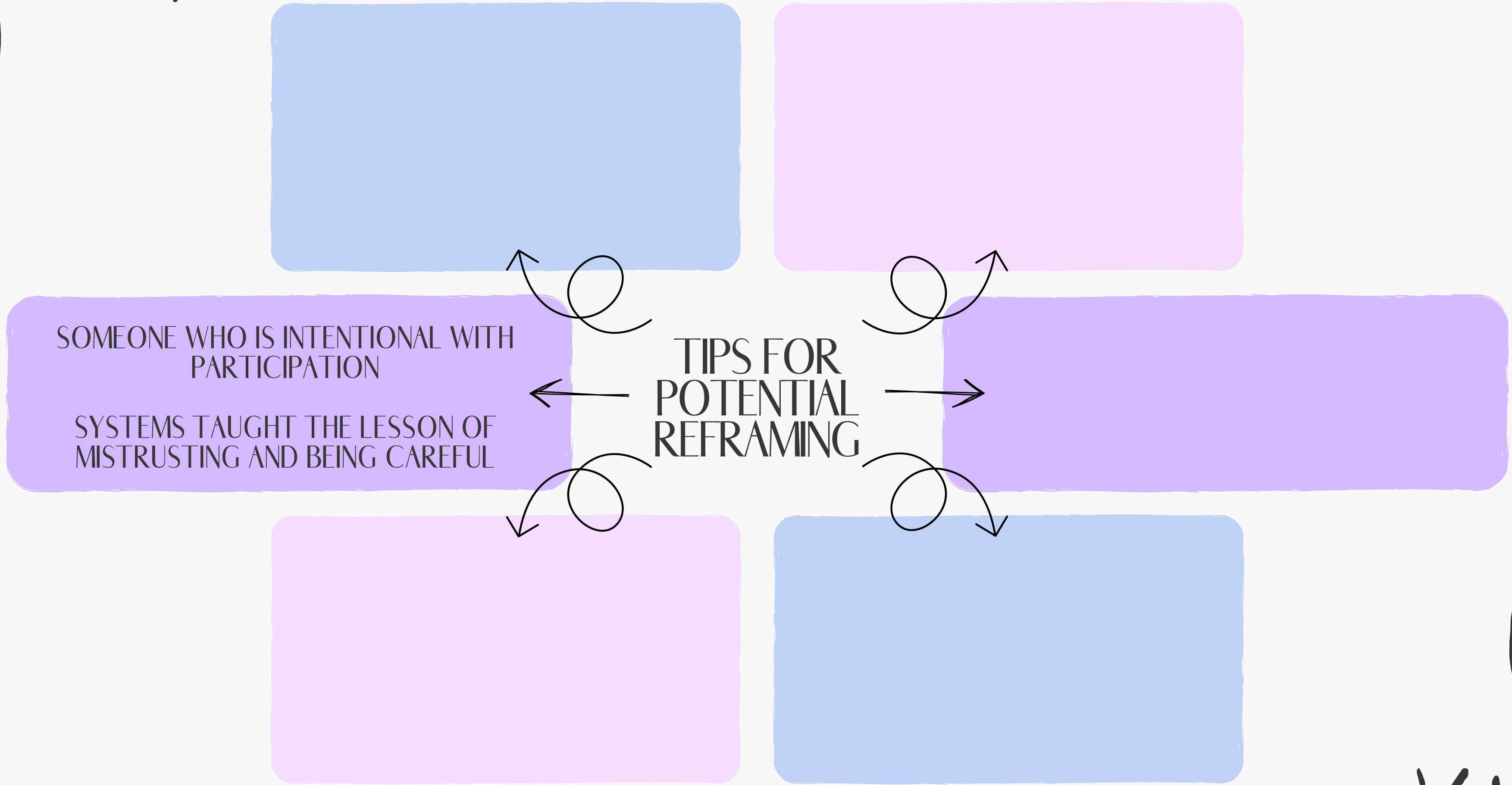
SOMEONE WHO MIGHT NOT YET
BE ENGAGED

BEING UNRELIABLE MAY NOT BE A
CHARACTER FLAW SO MUCH AS A
TRAIT- HOW CAN WE WORK WITH
THAT?



“They don’t care.”
“It doesn’t seem like you care to engage with me today.”
“They’re never going to be able to .. x/y/z...”





SOMEONE WHO KNOWS WHAT
THEY WANT

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND BEING
TOLD THEY CAN'T - EXPLICITLY OR
TOTHERWISE

SOMEONE WHO HAS ANOTHER IDEA
OF WHAT'S BEST FOR THEM

DESIRE TO HOLD ON TO
AUTONOMY & SELF
DETERMINATION CAUSED HURT BY
SYSTEMS/ AU THORITY

SOMEONE WHO IS INTENTIONAL WITH
PARTICIPATION

SYSTEMS TAUGHT THE LESSON OF
MISTRUSTING AND BEING CAREFUL

TIPS FOR POTENTIAL REFRAMING

SOMEONE WHO IS GETTING THEIR NEEDS
MET IN A WAY THEY KNOW HOW

NAVIGATION AND SURVIVAL SKILLS HAVE
BEEN INFORMED BY WHAT'S WORKED

SOMEONE WHO MIGHT NOT YET
BE ENGAGED

BEING UNRELIABLE MAY NOT BE A
CHARACTER FLAW SO MUCH AS A
TRAIT- HOW CAN WE WORK WITH
THAT?

SOMEONE WHO HAS EXPERTISE ON
THEMSELVES

SYSTEMS DISEMPOWER PEOPLE
ALL THE TIME. HAVING AND
HOLDING ON TO INSIGHT MATTERS

FINAL THOUGHTS



Recognize your own
limitations and frustrations.
Say hello and welcome them
in for deeper exploration.
What is driving your feelings?

What can you ask yourself?

FINAL THOUGHTS

01

Recognize your own
limitations and frustrations.
Say hello and welcome them
in for deeper exploration.

What is driving your feelings?

What can you ask yourself?

02

Once you know what's driving
feelings, you can decide what
you want and what you need to
do about them.

Supervisory support?

Team support?

Deeper learning/ training?

FINAL THOUGHTS

01

Recognize your own limitations and frustrations. Say hello and welcome them in for deeper exploration. What is driving your feelings?

What can you ask yourself?

02

Once you know what's driving feelings, you can decide what you want and what you need to do about them.

Supervisory support?

Team support?

Deeper learning/ training?

03

Prepare for each interaction to be new.

Approach with curiosity, with gentleness for self and client, with honesty and repair in heart.

FINAL THOUGHTS

01

Recognize your own limitations and frustrations. Say hello and welcome them in for deeper exploration. What is driving your feelings?

What can you ask yourself?

02

Once you know what's driving feelings, you can decide what you want and what you need to do about them.

Supervisory support?

Team support?

Deeper learning/ training?

03

Prepare for each interaction to be new.

Approach with curiosity, with gentleness for self and client, with honesty and repair in heart.

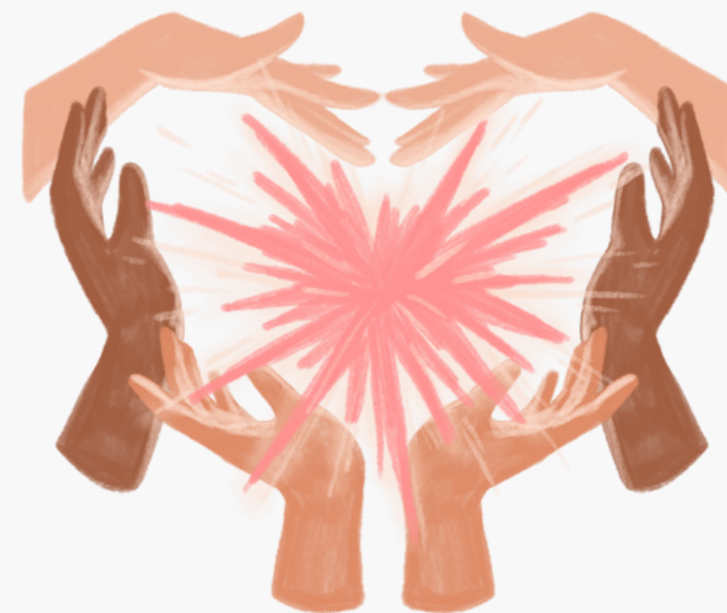
04

Find community and co-conspirators. These are not individual issues and this is not individual work.

Liberation and ease is found in the larger collective.

THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING TO
SPEND THIS HOUR IN HONEST
COMMUNITY RELECTION!

Mya Haley - Elizabeth.Haley@nyspi.columbia.edu



“This client is needy.”
“Why do you always need something?”
“They think they run things.”

“They should just listen to me/ us.”
“You’re being non-adherent/ non-compliant.”
“Why even try if they’ve never wanted to in the past?”

“They don’t care.”
“It doesn’t seem like you care to engage with me today.”
“They’re never going to be able to .. x/y/z...”

WHAT WE
SAY/ WHAT
GETS SAID

“They’re being manipulative.”
“I will not be manipulated.”
“They’re trying to pull one over on you.”

“They never show up for this.”
“You better do A or I won’t do B.”
“You’re better off not getting your hopes up with that one.”

“They think they know better than me”
“I went to school for this so I think I know more about it.”
“You can’t tell them anything.”