

WHAT IS COUNSELING?

INTRODUCTION

It is very difficult to secure any agreement on a definition of counseling (Patterson, 1969). Any given professional group of counselor usually represents at least several different orientations and preparations. Counseling as discussed here is the psychological process by which a professional person helps a relatively normal client explore, understand, and accept behavior so that future behavioral choices can be made, particularly those of an educational or vocational nature. These choices are based on client self-perceptions as well as goals and values, each of which influence how an individual behaves toward self and toward his environment. Such perceptions, goals, and values are reflected in behavioral choices. Therefore, they need to be a part of the process of exploring, understanding, and accepting behavior. Goals and values of the client are a very important part of counseling, for unless the counselor has some sensitivity to them and some understanding of them as well, there is a very limited basis for communication in counseling. Unless the counselor can also accept the client's rather strong feelings about certain facets of his environment, it is difficult for him to help the client. This understanding and acceptance of client feelings about self and environment becomes a real and essential

part of counseling. These feelings must be resolved before effective decisions can be made and carried out by the client.

Behavior is a product of the things that have happened to a client and the feelings, goals, and values that have developed as a result of these experiences. If a counselor is to help a client change such behavior, the behavior must be explored so that the client understands it. This is only one portion of the counseling process, however. The other portion is for the client to be able to accept and live with his behavior to the extent that he can learn to make more effective and satisfactory behavioral choices. Until this happens, counseling is not completed. The counseling process has not worked.

The problem presented in counseling usually deal with the interaction of the client and his environment. It should be obvious that the counselor is a part of that environment and, therefore, has an effect upon it and upon the client.

The tools and processes of counseling are chosen from psychology, sociology, economics, social work, medicine, vocational guidance, educational guidance, and from the team approach to individual problems. This team approach in the school setting is usually called a staff meeting or case conference and is devoted to a given

individual or case in counseling. It includes the counselor, selected teachers, and other school and non-school personnel concerned with a given client. In a rehabilitation setting or a medical setting, this team includes the physician, psychiatrist or clinical psychologist, social worker, and the counselor or counseling psychologist. Team members will vary from setting to setting, but the team approach is quite effective.

DEFINITION OF COUNSELING

Counseling is the helping relationship, which includes (1) someone seeking help, (2) someone willing to give help, who is (3) capable of it, or trained to help (4) in a setting which permits that help to be given and received. Although there are many counseling approaches that would fit this set of criteria, certain common elements exist within all these approaches:

1. Counseling involves responding to not just the feelings and thoughts of the client. Or, thinking of this in another way, the counselor also deals with both attitudes and behaviors of the client. Existing theoretical approaches differ with respect to emphasis and order of responsiveness to feelings and behavior. Some approaches (client centered; existential) favor an emphasis on feeling; others (rational-

emotive; reality therapy; behavioral) emphasize the importance of behaviors and actions. An eclectic counseling model, however would acknowledge the importance of being able to identify and respond appropriately to both feeling states and behaviors.

2. Counseling involves a basic acceptance of the client's perceptions and feelings irrespective of outside evaluative standards. In other words, the counselor must first accept where the client is at the present time before dealing with where the client could be. Considering this from the client's point of view, he needs the counselor's understanding of his current situation and concerns before he can anticipate growth and change in a new direction.
3. Confidentiality and privacy constitute essential ingredients in the counseling setting. Physical facilities that preserve this quality are important. Therefore counseling is not typically conducted in the counselor's home, the local coffee shop, or other informal, non-confidential settings.
4. Counseling is voluntary; it is not usually effective when it is something that the client

is required to do. regardless of how the client is referred, the counselor never uses coercion as a means of obtaining or continuing with a client.

5. London (1968) notes that the counselor operates with a conservative bias against communicating to the client detailed information about his own life. Although there are times when counselor self-disclosure is appropriate, generally the counselor does not complicate the interview by focusing attention on his personal life and concerns.
6. One skill underlying all systems of counseling is that of communication. Counselors and clients alike continually transmit and receive verbal and non-verbal messages during the interview process. Therefore awareness of and sensitivity to the kinds of messages present is an important prerequisite for counselor effectiveness.

WHO IS THE CLIENT?

Another way to describe counseling is to describe a counselor's clients. The clients are usually individuals whose behavior is within the normal range as indicated by

a report of the Division of Counseling Psychology of the American Psychological Association (APA, 1952, p.175). The professional goal of the counselor is to foster the psychological development of the individual. This includes all people on the adjustment continuum from those who function at tolerable levels of adequacy to those suffering from more severe psychological disturbances. The counselor will spend the bulk of his time with individuals within the normal range, but his training should qualify him to work in some degree with individuals at any level of psychological adjustment. Counseling stresses the positive and preventative. It focuses upon the stimulation of personal development in order to maximize personal and social effectiveness and to forestall psychologically crippling disabilities. This facilitation of personal growth takes place through utilizing the interrelated techniques of psychological assessment and effective intercommunication between client and counselor. It means also the utilization of the interpersonal relationships involved in group situations as well as in individual counseling.

There are some exceptions to this, but in general it holds true. There is a growing use of counselors in many settings, but the bulk of counseling still takes place in an educational setting. Most of the clients with whom the counselor will deal in the educational setting are clients whose behavior is within the normal range. The

counselor may wonder at times what normal means. Normal as used here means the ability of the client to produce socially acceptable behavior. The normal or usual range of behavior to the counselor means a standard deviation either side of the mean for a given group. The client may have special problems within the normal range; he may have minor deviations outside the average range of behavior which place him at the extremes in some particular behavior; or, he may be exhibiting behavior normal only while he is a member of a special economic, racial, or national subgroup in a given setting.

Therefore, a part of counselor preparation is devoted to the study of clients with all sorts of minor deviations within or about the average range of behavior, because a counselor needs to know about the vast number of ways in which problems develop within the individual with who he will work. The counselor does not need to have direct experience in all these areas to learn about the many variations of behavior which produce the problems the client brings to him. It is necessary that the counselor have this information sufficiently at his command so that he can understand and respond effectively to what the client is telling him. If the counselor consistently misinterprets or respond inadequately to what the client says, counseling will be neither effective nor of long duration. If the client has to explain

in detail each time he makes statements about his experiences, he will soon seek help elsewhere. So, during his education and experience, the counselor has to learn about most of the minor deviations from normal behavior which he will encounter if he is to function meaningfully in the counseling situation. He also needs to remember that all human beings are more alike than they are different, even while he focuses on the differences among those human beings.

HOW THE CLIENT SEES COUNSELING

The nature of counseling can also be described from the viewpoint of the client. The client has reached a critical point in personal development where help is needed if he is to emerge with positive effects. He has progressed as far as he can without this help. The major help that the counselor gives the client is toward control of self and his environment so that he can produce effective behavior. The counselor does not usually attempt to change the environment; he helps the client change the way in which he perceives the environment, and this changes client behavior. For example, when a counselor works with a client to help him recognize his feelings about his home and his parents, the home and the parents themselves will also be different afterward. The counselor helps the client to change part of the interac-

tion taking place. This changes the entire interaction. As a result, the client perceives and is perceived differently. Behavior of all parties involved is changed by the change in him.

CONDITIONS NECESSARY TO COUNSELING

There have to be certain conditions present before counseling can take place. Robinson (1950) suggested client readiness for counseling as one of these conditions. Unless a person is ready for counseling, it is difficult to work with him. This readiness involves two things. First, it involves an awareness of the need for change. The client must know that he has to make some changes. But that is not enough. An example would be a client who keeps saying, "I understand myself, I know I need to do certain things." But he does not do the things and the changes do not take place. It is true that the client understands, but he comes reluctantly to the interview because, at this point, he is not ready to make changes. So there must be a second element involved. The client must be willing to try to change.

The counselor cannot create this counseling readiness. Counselors can promote or retard counseling readiness, but they cannot create it. This has to come from within - just as an individual must make the decision that his tooth is hurting so unbearably that he must go

to the dentist. He puts it off just as long as he can. But there comes a time when he can no longer delay. The same thing is true in counseling. The more successful the client's experiences with the counselor are, the more he is willing to return for further counseling.

Hahn and MacLean (1955) point out that the counselor can open and close doors for the client. But he cannot throw the client through the door. This is something the client has to do. He has to choose the doors he will enter. However, the counselor cannot always wait for counseling readiness to develop. He must actively work to create it by every means at his disposal. He must get clients who need his help into his office. In a sense, practicum is like this: the client does not have a real need for counseling but is trying it as he would try a new flavor of ice cream. It is up to the counselor to make him want it, use it, and ask for more when he needs it.

COUNSELING CONDITION

Rogers (1957) has described six conditions which he claims are essential before constructive personality change can occur.

For constructive personality change to occur, it is necessary that these conditions exist and continue over a period of time.

1. Two persons are in psychological contact.
2. The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.
3. The second person, whom we shall term the Counselor, is congruent or integrated in the relationship.
4. The counselor experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.
5. The counselor experiences an emphatic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client.
6. The communication to the client of the counselor's emphatic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved.

Rogers goes on to point out that no other conditions are necessary if these six conditions exist and continue over a period of time. A process of constructive personality change will follow. However, these six conditions are almost impossible to achieve by chance. They occur only after a long and grueling process of learning how to fit all the things the counselor knows about human behavior into a framework that will permit him to help many different kinds of clients.

When considering the counseling relationship, one needs to bear in mind the importance of having the client feel secure and comfortable enough to learn. If an individual is protected, or feels that he is protected, he will usually feel free to experiment with learning positive ways to change his behavior. In counseling there is considerable agreement that if the counselor does not do anything but create a situation or an atmosphere in which the client can sit and think and feel protected, constructive change will take place.

The processes used by the counselor to establish a successful counseling relationship are a part of his personal and professional attitudes. A counselor should be able to like most people and to demonstrate this in the counseling interview. The client is usually quick to sense if the counselor does not like him, and the counseling relationship is influenced adversely. This relationship, however, is a professional one. The counselor is neither a friend nor a "buddy". He is a professionally competent person whose education and experience have qualified him for this helping role. He has learned to keep his personal biases out of the interview so that they will not influence the climate he is trying to maintain with the client.

THE COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP

Counseling is an accepting, trusting, and safe relationship between a counselor and his clients. Within this relationship clients learn to face, express, and cope with their most disturbing feelings and thoughts; they also develop the courage and self-confidence to apply what they have learned in changing their behavior. When their new behaviors do not seem to work, they feel sufficiently secure within the counseling relationship to appraise them to determine why they did not work, to modify them, or to identify other approaches to try. If positive outcome is to take place in counseling, a good interpersonal relationship between client and counselor must be established and maintained.

One of the unique characteristics of the relationship is the counselor's ability to listen - to focus his attention on his client's needs, to exhibit genuine caring, and at the same time to maintain a healthy separateness. He also is able to convey his commitment to his clients and to communicate to them what he expects from them in order to help them change.

When he is at his best, a counselor can feel deeply with a client without experiencing emotional reactions which are deleterious to the counseling relationship.

Such a relationship wins a client's confidence and enables him to discuss problems that he has been unable to discuss, perhaps unable even to accept as his own.

The counselor - client relationship should not be construed as a magical phenomenon that produces or affects changes in persons in mysterious ways. There are definite characteristics of the relationship that make it helpful to the client. But even though the counselor may possess many of these relationship qualities, these qualities need to be perceived by the client. Client perception of these counselor qualities in a positive way increases the attraction to the counseling process. Moreover, these perceptions are related to decreased interpersonal anxiety, increased self-exploration, and commitment to counseling (Truax, 1962; Van Deer Veen, 1970).

In order for counselors to achieve a good relationship they must have these facilitating qualities:-

1. Empathy - The ability of counselor to understand another's thoughts, feelings and behavior and is able to accurately communicate this to the other person (Rogers, 1961). An empathic response is not merely a mirror reflection of the content of what another is saying. It is more of an accurate appraisal or inference about the underlying meaning of the words or

nonverbal gestures derived from careful observation of the client's behavior.

Suppose a client is describing with a great deal of objectivity and little emotion a recent breakup of a relationship with a woman. A counselor responding to what is inferred to be the emotional content of the client's statement might say, "You seem to be able to talk about your situation, but at the same time you seem to feel very much alone. That must be frightening at times." If the counselor's response is accurate, the client would be more likely to focus on his loneliness and fear. The counselor would encourage a deeper exploration of the significance of loneliness and anxiety. The self-enhancing as well as the self-defeating aspects of these emotions would be explored.

Counselor responses that do not convey understanding and accurate empathy may erect barriers to effective communication and thus close off possibilities for client self-exploration.

2. Acceptance - A counselor may intellectually grasp a client's innermost feelings and behavioral dispositions - and profess to understand these. But the question arises: Can a counse-

lor accept the client's ideas, values, feelings, and behavior, especially if these differ from the counselor's? Acceptance implies a nonrating or evaluation of the total person in light of his or her acceptable or unacceptable tendencies. Acceptance need not imply that a counselor must agree with, or reinforce, every attitude, value, and behavior of the client. But it does suggest an acknowledgement that self-defeating behavior may be as natural as self-enhancing behavior, and that human beings are uniquely capable of both.

3. Openness - Openness to experience assumes in the counselor an attitude of affirming and acknowledging the reality of the client's personal orientation to life. Openness assumes an awareness of human processes, whether these be of a rational or irrational nature - a willingness to attend to oneself and others with a minimum of distortion, defensiveness, and avoidance and denial (Rogers, 1961).

Counselors often ignore problem areas expressed by their clients, simply because they themselves are afraid of the same areas. If any emotion is likely to render a counselor ineffective, it is anxiety. Anxiety serves to cue

defensive patterns of behaviour, whereby the counselor may resort to avoiding significant problem areas by simply ignoring or not responding to those areas.

Counselor characteristics, such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertness, influence counseling outcomes as do those of empathy, openness, and acceptance. However, these attitudes are by no means sufficient conditions for desirable counseling outcomes. Counselors sometimes also behave in an active-directive-authoritative way, wherein they apply techniques and methods aimed at educating, facilitating, and reinforcing the client's growth in personal, social, and career areas. Through the counseling process, people are guided to become more self-aware, to increase self-exploration, to make constructive behavioral commitments, to implement action, and to ultimately internalize healthy behavioral patterns (Tosi & Marzella, 1975).

The counselor tries to understand each client's perception of himself, of his problem, and of his situation. Although he often tries to help each client to understand the forces at work within himself and his environment in order to help the client to cope with these forces more effectively, the counselor should realize that insight alone is not sufficient for anyone, and for some it is not necessary.

CONCLUSION

Counseling is one of several professions that has grown to help people and institutions cope with the demands of an increasingly stressful world lacking available and traditional helping sources because of shifts in social organisations.

The overall objectives of counselors tend to be toward the higher - order goal of helping people develop in the most positive way possible under some of the constraints of individual traits and environments. Counseling also includes efforts to help people avoid developing difficulties and to remedy problems already in existence.

Counselors are likely to be individuals who value interpersonal relations, aesthetic activities, and are trusting, calm, and interpersonally sensitive. While it is not clearly demonstrated that such traits enhance counseling effectiveness, it has been speculated that these traits may be related to the ability to display nonpossessive warmth, genuineness, and empathy (Osipow, 1980).

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