

The hazards of learning counselling and methods for harm reduction

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This paper explores a number of factors that contribute to the negative effects of learning counselling². Various methods for the reduction of harm are suggested.

Introduction

In the public's eye the image of a counsellor might typically be that of a warm, caring, non-judgemental person who strides through life not even pausing for self-congratulation. Aspects of this image are perhaps also generated from within our own ranks, with the general belief that counselling training assists us to become excellent communicators, respond well to stress, improve our relationships and help us to develop better self-esteem. Of course to some extent all of these things can and do happen (cf., Holt, 1959; Pasnav & Bayley, 1971).

However, some of the effects of counselling training are not so desirable. Depending on a variety of factors, the process of becoming and being a counsellor can also include feelings of anxiety and depression (Halleck & Wood, 1962), which some respond to in negative ways including drug abuse or even suicide (Thorensen, Nathan, Skorina & Lilburg, 1983). In fact such problems are so prevalent that Corey, Corey and Callanan (1993) go so far as to suggest that counselling is a "hazardous profession" (p. 47).

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²The term 'counselling' is used generically and encompasses the disciplines of psychotherapy, psychiatry and counselling psychology.

The first part of this paper examines factors identified in the literature as being problematic for counselling trainees. Positive attributes of learning counselling are not addressed, so as to help draw sharp attention to the often unspoken pains of beginning counsellors. The latter part of the paper discusses methods found to be useful in reducing the negative effects of learning counselling.

Aspects of the problem

Family and friends

As beginning counsellors proceed through their training, their relationships with family and friends are likely to change. These changes may not always be comfortable, and could be disconcerting or even damaging. Owen (1993) suggested that the trainee counsellor will experience a number of different attitudes and reactions from family and friends, with these including horror, fear, fascination, anxious jokes and the fear of being analysed. Seashore (1975) described such phenomena as follows:

Learning how to better use oneself in the helping process is likely to change one's basis for self-esteem, and alter what it is one values in oneself or others. This produces a significant amount of conflict among those who liked you for what you were, not what you are becoming (p.3).

Studies carried out on how counsellors' lives are affected by their profession reinforce such notions. Guy and Liaboe (1986) reported that many counsellors experience negative

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effects with respect to their ability to relate meaningfully with family and friends. Also, Farber (1983a) stated that half the counsellors in his study reported decreased emotional investment in their own families. He also noted (Farber, 1983b) that counsellors tend to reduce their circle of friends and socialise less as their career progresses.

It might seem that the experience of counselling may exhaust the counsellor's capacity for listening, giving and even sitting still with people. Perhaps there is a limit to how much empathy a person can commit in one day. When the counsellor returns home, empathy potentials may have run dry.

The trainee counsellor experiences demands threefold; they are not only in the role of counsellor, they also have to absorb new information and be personally open to the effects the information has on their psyche. The effects have something of a spiral effect: the loss of meaningful relationships and sense of isolation can lead to more angst, discomfort and further isolation.

Becoming psychologically minded

Another of the stressful factors of learning counselling relates to the process of learning to be psychologically minded. In most training programmes it is necessary for the student to learn about and understand inner dynamics and unconscious processes. Consequently, beginning counsellors are likely to compare their own development and issues with that of their clients (Halleck & Wood, 1962). Students may question their own capacity to cope with stress, their own defences and even their own sanity. They may also compare themselves with their class colleagues, the tutor and

perhaps also with authors of their counselling texts. This process is similar to the medical student who becomes convinced that they are suffering from whatever disease they are currently studying (Merkin & Little, 1967).

We know from experience that comparing oneself to others is unhelpful and often leads to feelings of inadequacy. Yet somehow this lesson gets lost in many counselling classroom environments.

Self expectation of beginning counsellors

In addition to over-identifying with clients, considerable stress can occur when counsellors do not live up to their self expectations; or they fall short of their own idealised views of themselves. Deutsch (1984) claimed that counsellors have exceptionally high goals and hold perfectionist attitudes in their work. He lists three common irrational beliefs that cause the most stress for counsellors:

- 1) I should always work at my peak level of enthusiasm and competence.
- 2) I should always be able to cope with any client emergency that arises.
- 3) I should be able to help every client.

Corey, Corey and Callanan (1993) add to this list:

- 4) When a client does not make progress it's my fault.
- 5) I should not take time off work when I know a particular client needs me.
- 6) My job is my life.
- 7) I should be a model of mental health.
- 8) I should be on call at all times.
- 9) A client's needs always come before my own.
- 10) I am the most important person in my client's life.

- 11) I am responsible for my client's behaviour.
- 12) I have the power to control my client's life.

Beliefs such as these undermine a person's confidence and professional capacities. They can lead to feelings of guilt, sadness, self-anger, powerlessness and other undermining experiences.

Motivations for becoming a counsellor

A further reason why counselling training could be experienced as negative or uncomfortable may be to do with the unresolved life experiences that students bring with them. It is reasonably common to hear that people get involved in becoming a counsellor because of an interest in their own problems and dynamics.

Guy (1987) commented on this by noting that many people enter the counselling profession because of a need for intimacy, due to a sense of isolation that existed for them during their childhood. His research indicated that often counsellors played a 'therapeutic' role in their family of origin, a pattern established long before they entered training. In such cases their profession is often an extension of unresolved family dynamics. The question is raised as to whether the counsellor is repeating their childhood role in their professional life? Where this happens, it could involve ongoing stress and difficulties.

How counsellors respond to stress

Counsellors often respond to stress badly. Coping mechanisms include social withdrawal, depression, denial, drug and alcohol abuse, displaced behaviour and obsessionality (cf., Thorensen, Nathan,

Skorina & Lilburg, 1983).

Lalotitis and Grayson (1985) pointed out that the rate of mental illness and drug dependency amongst counsellors ranges from five to 15 per cent. More worrisome is research showing that the rate of suicide for counsellors is the same or even greater than that of the general population (Owen, 1993).

Methods for harm reduction

If asked by a prospective counselling trainee: "*Would I be better to study accountancy rather than expose myself to the complexities of learning counselling?*", one could answer: "*It depends*". Fundamentally, it depends on a number of key factors including: 'how do the training providers and the trainee's supervisor manage the negative potentials of learning counselling?' The remainder of this paper explores ways that this can be achieved.

Should counsellors be counselled?

Some counselling training providers indicate, perhaps ironically, that the problem of negative effects on the student is best handled by ensuring the students receive their own personal counselling. Other training providers disagree (cf., Grennberg & Staller, 1981). A vigorous debate currently exists as to whether personal counselling should indeed be compulsory for counselling students.

In psychodynamically-oriented training environments there is an unquestioning acceptance of the need for personal counselling (cf., Grennberg & Staller, 1981). Sometimes this is veiled with the word 'voluntary', yet it would be unlikely that a student would complete their training if they decided against

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personal counselling. This is very evident in the following quote, which carries within it a circular argument:

We do not insist on personal analysis as a prerequisite or an accompaniment of training; though we do emphasise its importance. We prefer to leave this to the discretion of the trainee. As he [sic] gains insight the trainee eventually decides that a personal analysis is desirable. If he does not discover this we judge that he has not proceeded very far in training (Beven-Brown, 1997).

Findings in support of counselling being an inherent part of training were revealed in a study investigating student endorsement of personal counselling as a requirement for graduation (Fouad, Hains & Davis, 1990). Their results showed that 66 percent of the 106 students surveyed believed that personal counselling should be a part of the curriculum.

Even when personal counselling is not compulsory during training, research suggests that a significant number of counsellors do enter into personal counselling. For example, Garfield and Kurtz (1974) researched 855 members of The American Psychological Association Division of Clinical Psychology. Of those surveyed 63 percent indicated that they had received some personal counselling. Another survey (Gochman, Allgood & Greer, 1982) showed that 44 percent of members of The Association for the Advancement of Behaviour Therapy experienced some form of counselling. These statistics do not say much about whether the associations or counsellors themselves believe that personal

counselling should be optional or compulsory. However, they do indicate that a sizeable number of counsellors experience a need for personal counselling at some point.

Some training environments and professional associations such as The New Zealand Psychological Society do not advocate compulsory personal counselling per se, with the underpinning question being the value of self referrals over compulsion. However, there is general support for the need for 'personal work'. For example, The New Zealand Association of Counsellors has recently made its criteria for membership specific in this area, now stating that the counsellor must have at least 100 hour of personal growth work before being eligible to join the Association (NZAC Newsletter, 1997). Much of this personal work will be part of training experiences and this often includes experiences of being a client as part of the training processes.

The value of personal therapy and personal growth work for counselling trainees is also echoed by well-established authors of counselling text books. For example, Corey, Corey and Callanan (1993) state that:

Personal therapy during training and also throughout one's professional career can result in counsellors who are better able to focus on the welfare of their clients – By focusing on their personal development, counsellor trainees are better equipped to deal with a range of transference reactions their clients are bound to have towards them; they are also better able to detect countertransference on their part and

have a basis for dealing with such reactions in a therapeutic manner (p.54).

Promoting self-awareness in the class environment

Acknowledging and responding to the likely negative effects of learning counselling in the classroom is also fundamental for harm reduction. Blocher (1987) argued that the most critical area of counsellor education is the extent to which counselling programmes themselves are growth producing. He noted that often counselling training fails to model the core conditions of counselling and instead emphasises competition and evaluation. Corey, Corey and Callanan (1993) echoed this and suggested that class discussions explore the problems associated with becoming a counsellor.

The New Zealand Association of Counsellors also make this point in their guidelines for the training of counsellors:

The main features of any counselling training course must be the development of counsellor self-awareness and self-understanding, the acquisition of counselling knowledge and skills and supervised practice of counselling (NZAC Handbook, p.31).

However, the practice of teaching self-awareness is not always as straight forward, as Dryden and Thorne (1991) point out:

For the counsellor trainer, one of the most daunting issues that has to be faced at the outset of any course is the

fact that if things go well they will not go smoothly. The reason for this is that training, if it is to be effective, must involve a high degree of self exploration on the part of the trainees with the aim of increasing their self awareness and self knowledge (p. 3).

It is, therefore, important to manage the difficulties as they arise with acknowledgment, information, discussion and normalising. These types of responses can greatly reduce the anxieties and other disconcerting feelings of counselling trainees.

Supervision

Supervision is, of course, another fundamental method for monitoring and resolving the negative side-effects of counselling and counselling training. This is described by Powell (1991) when discussing why supervision is important.

Clinical supervision has been demonstrated to be the key that unlocks the door to improve staff retention and turnover, job satisfaction, reduced counsellor burnout, and, indirectly, to the quality of patient care.

However, it is alarming still to hear counselling trainees say that their supervisor has never focused on their personal life and how the training is undermining their psychological well-being.

The following types of questions could well be addressed by supervisors:

How does the trainee's family react to their doing the counselling training?

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*What changes do they notice in themselves?
What changes do they notice in people around them?
How might all this effect them in the role of counsellor?
How do they manage these changes?
Are any issues to do with the process of becoming a counsellor keeping them awake at night?*

Summary and implications

The process of learning counselling can be painful. The trainee counsellor is likely to experience rapid changes in their relationships and their self perception that can cause many difficulties.

As a profession, counsellors have not always been successful in managing or resolving these difficulties. Indications are that more counsellors than is acceptable abuse alcohol and drugs, and the rate of counsellor suicide is also a matter of concern.

Recognition of the negative effects of learning counselling has been rare. Only recently has attention been given to such concerns and to suggested methods for harm reduction. Perhaps ignoring the negative side of counselling has inadvertently contributed to the problem.

The trend of late, however, advocates a range of mechanisms for reducing the negative aspects of counselling training. These include personal counselling or growth work during training, counselling trainers modeling the core conditions of counselling, facilitation of discussion on personal issues in the classroom, and addressing the issues within supervision.

One would hope that such measures would be implemented consistently throughout

counselling training environments, professional associations and beyond. Through taking responsibility for, discussing and normalising the negative effects of learning counselling, considerable trainee stress can be reduced; thereby allowing for enhanced effectiveness in both professional and personal lives.

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