

Counselling: A Process of Personal Integration and Change

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Counselling is concerned with enabling clients to engage in the process of restoration to the highest possible state of physical, mental and spiritual health (Windsor, 1987). It is a means of opening up the past so that it can be faced, renegotiated and in some respects relived (Jacobs, 1986). It is a relationship within which problems can be explored, solved and transcended and where clients may feel safe enough to make contact with their inner core, thus enabling it to emerge as an integrating and healing force.

Healing, or wholeness, denotes the harmonious integration of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of wellbeing as well as social responsibility (Vaughan, 1993). It is a dynamic ongoing process of change which is interwoven with all the elements of wellbeing (Windsor, 1987). Windsor asserts that just as disease is the manifestation of submerged fears, conversely healing is the substantive representation of the expulsion of these demonic forces.

The premise from which this paper is being presented is that psychologically 'healthy' human beings function from an integrated inner core. I am suggesting that REAL and MEANINGFUL change does not happen in an individual's life unless they make contact with their inner core and work with it. My argument is that if counselling is to be effective then the counsellor's task must involve facilitating clients on their personal journeys to their inner core, so that they may re-contact it and work with it.

When I refer to the **inner core** I am speaking about the integral part of each one of us which is our **essence**, our **source**, the very **centre** of our being. It is the part which remains untouched and uncontaminated by whatever is happening in our lives. It is the centre from which we create

and develop survival strategies which enable us to cope with the many and varied happenings which take place in our lives. It is the element of our being which remains constant, steady, steadfast and unwavering, no matter what those eventualities may be.

Carl Jung referred to this component as the 'self - the prototype of wholeness; the regulator of the centre of the psyche; a transpersonal power that transcends the ego' (Stevens, 1990). He described it as the centre as well as the whole circumference of our being which embraces both the conscious and unconscious, the nucleus which presents itself in the form of dreams, images, myths, fairytales, symbols etc. Ian Gordon-Brown (1978), joint founder and director of the centre for Transpersonal Psychotherapy in England, describes it as "the central energy of the psychological system, the key to growth, integration and expansion of awareness."

Counselling or therapy (and I use the terms interchangeably), is concerned with the process of change. Counsellors, no matter from what theoretical perspective they may choose to work, will be acting as a catalyst, offering clients support and incentive as they discover more about themselves and as they process the possibilities available to them on their personal journeys.

Clients enter counselling for a variety of reasons. For example, some may be seeking more gratifying ways of managing their lives. Others may be concerned with finding ways of solving or managing particular problems which they may be having to deal with in their lives. Some may be in search of inner guidance, looking for a deeper meaning in their lives. Whatever the motivation, the counsellor's task will be to listen and respond to the individual stories presented by clients and to offer them challenge and support as they do so.

The counsellor will offer challenge as clients consider new ways of being, and support when clients find themselves swamped by moments of despair or confusion. Gerard Egan, author and founder of the Skilled Helper Model of

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counselling, suggests that it is the responsibility of all effective helpers to provide both challenge and support to their helpees. Egan (1990) contends that challenge without support is brutal and that support without challenge is anaemic. Together, however, they contain the essential ingredients which engage people in moving forward, taking risks and possibly making informed decisions about their lives.

My contention is that whilst many changes may take place in people's behaviour patterns as a consequence of counselling, real and meaningful change will not take place unless the person is engaged in the process of re-visiting the Inner Core of their being. In other words, unless the process of change involves a movement from within the Inner Core, the change will merely be 'cosmetic'.

Cosmetic change, or symptom resolution (Whitmore, 1991), is surface change. Watzlawick (1974) describes two varieties of change, which he calls first and second order change. First order change involves a rearrangement of the content of the psyche and ends up merely with a possible solution to the problem. Second order change transforms the total content of what is happening. It involves changing the system within which the problem is operating and is the only real change. First order change, or "cosmetic" change, is perfectly illustrated by Wilber (1980). He compares the field of counselling with a building comprising several floors, each of which represents a different level of consciousness. Cosmetic change alters only what occurs in the contents of the client's consciousness and is rather like the change which occurs when the furniture is moved around on the same floor. Real or transformational change occurs only when it involves shifting to a different level or context.

Cosmetic change is often the kind of change which is apparent in the early days of counselling when what is being dealt with are the issues which have inspired the person to seek counselling in the first place. I am not suggesting that it is inappropriate for counsellors to work with their clients at this level at the beginning of the relationship. On the contrary, if counsellors are working WITH their clients, then it is

important that they do deal with what is being presented. However, it is important that counsellors are mindful of the fact that this is 'presenting' material and as such is the cover masking what clients are really saying about themselves and their lives. When counsellors concentrate only upon "presenting" material and fail to pay attention to the underlying messages, they do their clients a disservice. They are in danger of leaving clients in a state of "cosmetic" change. Such change may well, in the short term, make a difference to the person's life and be valuable in that it may begin to build the person's confidence to undertake deeper work. However, it is important to recognise it for what it is and to be aware that, as surface change, it lacks the substance which will sustain long term effectiveness. It may also leave clients vulnerable to the resurgence of old patterns of behaviour, which invariably re-establish them in positions of powerlessness and low self-worth.

Effective counselling is not a linear process. On the contrary, it demands that counsellors be mindful, respectful and responsive to the very real and painful issues being presented by their clients. It also necessitates their being watchful for, and prepared to facilitate, the exploration of the deeper meanings and the potential transformation which may be emerging through the issues being presented.

The relationship between the counsellor and the client is critical. Roberto Assagioli (1967) believed that the quality of the relationship between counsellor and client was the very heart of the therapeutic process. He submitted that authentic human relating is essential to the establishment of trust between counsellors and clients and stressed that without this ingredient little growth would be possible.

Similarly, Crampton (1977) highlighted the importance of the quality of the helping relationship when she described it as the "indispensable context without which techniques are mere mechanical gimmicks which will lack true healing power" (p.55). Crampton also emphasised the importance of the level of the counsellor's personal integration, when she pointed out that it was the crucial element which determines the amount of clarity and love the

counsellor is able to bring to the traveller (client) on their journey. It would follow, then, that the relationship is the place to begin to look at what illuminates and gives meaning to the particular set of circumstances being presented by the client. It is the ground upon which the counsellor's operating principles and attitude towards the client stand (Whitmore, 1991).

Vaughan (1993) contends that the healing potential of the therapeutic relationship is enhanced when clients are perceived by their therapists as potentially creative and when they are encouraged to develop their own range of inner resources and problem solving techniques. She points out that the tendency to impose personal beliefs on clients and to seduce them into pursuing the path which the counsellor found to be most potent is a constant pitfall open to all therapists. It is therefore of paramount importance that counsellors are aware of this and that they resist the temptation. Clearly, the most self-affirming and sequentially powerful route to healing is the one which clients discover for themselves, albeit with the support and encouragement of the counsellor.

Jacobs (1986) talks of the importance of counsellors providing realistic hope for their clients, and Alice Miller (1979) addresses the significance of affording clients the freedom to experience feelings which are spontaneous. She points out that the kaleidoscope of life, in addition to displaying feelings of joy, cheer and beauty, also comprises human experiences of envy, jealousy, rage, disgust, greed, despair and mourning.

Realistic, positive self-worth cannot be accomplished unless all emotions are recognised and accepted as an integral part of living and it is the task of the counsellor to provide a safe enough environment in which they can be exposed, explored and expressed.

Carl Rogers (1980) spoke passionately about the importance of positive self-worth and Harvey Jackins (1972) emphasises the importance of counsellors establishing and re-establishing in their clients the sense of positive self-worth, in order that they develop and maintain a belief in their power and potential. In my view this means that counsellors have a responsibility to be alert

not only to the "presenting" problems clients bring but also to what may underlie those difficulties. What clients are NOT saying may be of greater importance than what they ARE saying.

It is my belief that real and meaningful change necessitates a double journey, inwards towards the Inner Core and outwards from within the Inner Core. It is a process of synthesis of inner and outer movement.

Eric Berne (1972) said that we are all born princes and princesses until significant others make us into frogs. It is my contention that all human beings enter the world in full possession of their unique power and potential. In other words, they are fully integrated with their Inner Core. In order to cope with the range of conflicting messages received and in order to adjust to individual social and emotional pressures, people create protective layers around their Inner Core. They make adjustments to their behaviour in order to 'fit in' and, in so doing, begin to lose sight of their distinctive, innate potential. They become distanced from the Inner Core and develop a distorted vision of themselves. Their picture is often one which undervalues their true self and their subsequent behaviour invariably reinforces this impression. So often they experience themselves as powerless or inadequate and the protective layers which were originally put up to enable them to cope with the blows of life begin to have a dysfunctional influence.

It is often at this point that people enter the counselling relationship and begin the telling of their stories. It may well be that their behaviour patterns have become so dysfunctional and their concept of themselves so low that in the early days of the counselling relationship the counsellor's task has to be primarily focused on their "presenting" problem, enabling clients to begin to develop a strong enough sense of self-worth that they become empowered to function more adequately in their day to day living.

As time goes by and clients evolve, their perception of themselves and their experiences change so that what was one day's truth becomes the next day's old perception. They begin to develop a more positive and realistic impression

of themselves and their lives. It is important as this process emerges that counsellors concentrate more fully on what underlies the story, or as Gerard Egan (1990) puts it, "What the person is REALLY saying about him/herself".

The question is of course, how do counsellors obtain a sense of what underlies the 'presenting' problem, and having obtained it, how do they work with it?

My conviction is that clients, as they tell their stories, present all the information that is necessary. I believe that clients have within them everything they need to regain a complete state of integration. The task of the counsellor is to be totally person centred. When I say "totally person centred" I am not referring to a particular theoretical model of counselling, but rather, to be totally focused-in on the person. Not only do counsellors need to be vigilant to the words, i.e. the content of the client's story, they also need to be vigilant to the gestures, the tone of voice, the symbolic language being used, the metaphors and the similes presented, all of these offer clues to the route leading to the Inner Core. It is important that counsellors not only pay attention to these clues, but that they also make appropriate responses to them, since it is these clues which encapsulate the key to the underlying story.

By sharing with their clients what they see, hear and sense as the story unfolds, counsellors can become proactive in encouraging their clients to explore the various aspects which emerge. Counsellors, in so doing, accompany their clients along the route and support them as they journey more deeply through the protective layers towards the Inner Core.

The process may well evoke a range of emotions and it is not unusual for clients to express pain and distress as they proceed. However it is important that counsellors recognise the healing quality of such expression and that they encourage and support their clients through the process. Jackin (1972) offers the hierarchy of emotional expression and emphasises the healing which is incurred as people are allowed to work their way through. His argument is that it is the blocking of emotional expression which causes psychological damage, not the expression of it.

In order to support and encourage clients as they move along their route towards fulfilment and to help them outwit their dysfunctional patterns of behaviour, counsellors need to have at their disposal a range of therapeutic interventions. It is important that counsellors are open to a whole range of approaches and that they are not so committed to one theoretical perspective that they deprive their clients of the possibilities available to them.

The choice of therapeutic interventions is fairly vast and I will simply mention the major ones which I have found particularly powerful in my work. They include dreamwork, visualisation, working with symbols and metaphors, imaging exercises, inner dialogue work, Gestalt, drawing, writing, bodywork, sculpting using a variety of media including paper, clay, coins, objects etc. The list is endless.

It is important to acknowledge that counselling is a dynamic, co-operative venture involving both client and counsellor and, when truly effective, it evokes change in the therapist as well as in the client. Ultimately, therapists have to find a style of working which is natural to themselves and flexible enough that they can adjust to, and fully accommodate, the differing needs of their individual clients (Gordon-Brown & Somers, 1988).

It is also important to appreciate that real, enduring and meaningful change is normally a relatively slow process. It requires a special environment in which to evolve, one which embodies the ambience described by Gordon-Brown and Somers (1988) - "the atmosphere of the counselling room, the being and energy of the therapist, the interaction between therapist and client, must be expressions of and be grounded in love. Without this nothing will endure."

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