

## “But They Only Came Once!” The Single Session in Career Counselling

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### **Abstract**

Clients often come only once to a counsellor. As a practitioner, Rosemary wondered what happens next when clients only attend a single counselling session. Does career counselling work, even if there is just one session? Do people make changes? This article reports on a small study of clients from a career counselling service who came for a single session, usually with concerns about career choice or change. Results indicate that virtually all of them found the session helpful and most made short- or long-term changes as a result. Their comments provide insight into the potential value of even a single counselling session.

**Keywords:** career counselling, single session, client, survey research, effectiveness

In career counselling practice, perhaps more than in other counselling settings, it is common to see a client for only a single session. When clients are funded by an agency—often the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ), or an employee assistance programme—it is usually agreed prior to the commencement of counselling that there will be several sessions if needed. However, fee-paying clients may hope that one session will be sufficient because of the cost, and they may have high expectations for what can be achieved. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that within school and tertiary settings, students may often see counsellors for single sessions, particularly with regard to educational or career counselling. Currently, Rosemary is offering career counselling in a community-based walk-in centre in which it is the norm for clients to attend for a single session. Questions arise, however, as to how effective counselling can be for clients within the constraints of only one session.

### Literature review

Relatively little methodologically sound research is available on the effectiveness of single-session therapy, whether it has been pre-planned or has been offered in contexts such as walk-in clinics (Stalker, Horton, & Cait, 2012). Furthermore, as Manthei (2006) observed, counsellors' perspectives have tended to dominate existing counselling research and relatively few studies have investigated client perspectives, as he has done (Manthei 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). However, existing studies indicate that a single session of psychotherapy, for example, can be effective for some clients, despite the constraints of time (Bloom, 2001; Campbell, 1999). Miller and Slive (2004) found that after a single session of family therapy at a walk-in centre, 67% of clients experienced some improvement and 43% reported sufficient alleviation of their concerns. Results of ongoing research supported the finding that this single-session therapy could be effective for a substantial proportion of clients (Miller, 2008). For a different clientele, children with mental health problems, Perkins (2006) also found that a planned single-session approach was effective.

In her practice, Rosemary has found Talmon's (1990) book, *Single Session Therapy*, very encouraging. Talmon reviewed the literature and conducted his own investigation into the effectiveness of single sessions. While therapists often considered clients who made one visit to be “dropouts,” Talmon found that 78% of the 200 clients he had seen had obtained the help they required and had made changes. Only 10% did not like the therapist or felt dissatisfied with the outcome of the session; for the others who had not made changes, there were practical reasons for not returning to therapy. As a result of his research, Talmon started to capitalise on the value of single sessions by using telephone contact before and after the session as part of the process. However, Talmon's work focuses on counselling and psychotherapy in an outpatient setting, not career counselling.

Consistent with the observation of Stalker et al. (2012), there seems to have been very little research into client experiences of single-session career counselling. A search through several social science and education databases revealed no studies in recent years on this theme, although guidance has been given in some textbooks (e.g., Ali & Graham, 1996) about facilitating a single career counselling session.

### The process of single-session career counselling

Underpinning any investigation into its effectiveness is an understanding of the process of career counselling. Substantial ground is covered in the first session, which lasts for

an hour to an hour and a half. There may have been an initial telephone contact that has in effect set the process underway, but when a client enters the counselling room there is a lot to be done. Rosemary observes, “When I know a client can only afford one session, I am extremely focused. Since this is so often the case, it becomes my *modus operandi*. I approach the session with an open mind, without a preconceived idea of the outcome. At first I ask the client to identify why they are here and what they want to achieve by the end of the session. I may at this stage clarify to what extent their expectations and goal for the session are realistic, because an hour spent on something as personal as one’s life, its successes and failures, its richness and deficits, is an unusual experience for many people. They may be unfamiliar with the counselling process and unaware of the ground it may cover, as well as the skills and strategies used by the counsellor; therefore, they may not know what they can expect. Next, I may ask them to take ten minutes to outline their background from school to the present. I then mentally use Margaret Merton’s holistic model of the career wheel,<sup>1</sup> scanning across what is going on in their lives now. I may draw this on a board and leave it in front of the client, and ask what parts of this are ‘hot’ for them at the moment. From these two initiatives will develop the ‘where to from here’, or the ‘how from here.’ It is frequently in the ‘pool of absence’ of certainty that direction comes.”

A mental checklist guides the facilitation of the counselling process. This includes considering whether clients need to:

- tell their story and see their truth;
- set out their ideas and examine them logically, discovering whether they already have the information they need;
- be challenged around irrational ideas, such as “I’m too old,” or “a job is for life”;
- hear other people’s stories of overcoming difficulties, or following a different path;
- receive confirmation that some aspects of their thinking and planning are effective and some aspects need more exploration;
- receive support and be affirmed in their process, through, for example, a grief, transition, or career-development model.

An initial assessment is usually undertaken in a single session, and some immediate problem-solving may be revealed. Careers information may also be provided. The client learns about the nature of career counselling and is told what could be covered in further sessions if more seem likely to be beneficial. Extra sessions might include information provision, vocational or personality testing, and homework tasks. The need for further counselling for specific concerns that have come up may also be discussed.

Even after a single session, a report is occasionally provided, and Rosemary has found that older men (40s plus) in particular respond well to a written summary. The counselling itself may feel intense and unusual, so when some clients leave they may lose the thread of what happened even though it seemed enough at the time. Written summaries have also been provided for a disabled graduate who could only come once, and for a teenage boy who was very able but had left school. In the latter case the provision of the report was to provide reassurance of his worth and abilities.

### **Other directions: Unexpected outcomes of career counselling**

Often a career counselling session has unexpected outcomes that may focus away from immediate career issues. For example, the mother of a polytechnic student was surprised when her daughter came home after her single session in order to negotiate refinancing the car her parents had helped her buy. Keeping up the payments was forcing her to work too many hours for her to study successfully. The young woman came to counselling concerned about career direction but realised she was overwhelmed by her financial commitments. In another example, after having saved up for her session, a single mother arrived too exhausted to make use of it. She was referred to a single mother support staff member who arranged a two-week holiday for her and her children. She returned a few months later a different person, to explore her career issues and take up study.

It is important here to emphasise the counselling element of the careers session, given that career counsellors argue that their practice is distinct from career consultancy or education. Counselling skills and processes help locate what has brought each person to career counselling and what that person's particular needs are (see, for example, Parkin & Plimmer, 2003). Words like “stuck” and “floundering” usually resonate with clients.

### **Method**

The lack of research into single-session career counselling led Rosemary to develop a survey of single-session clients in her own practice, both to obtain specific client feedback to guide her practice and to ascertain whether single-session career counselling was worth recommending to inquirers and potential clients. Even though the study would be small in scale and descriptive, she hoped it might contribute to the research literature on career counselling. It might also provide some information and points of discussion for career counsellors as well as practitioners working in other

settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. The second author, Hilary, as a research psychologist and a Careers Waikato Education Trust board member at the time, assisted with the project by advising during the development of the questionnaire, analysing the results, and co-authoring this article.

### **Procedure**

Questionnaires were sent to former clients of the agency who were identified on client records as having received a single session of career counselling between three months and eighteen months prior to the distribution of the survey. The clients were all self-referrals except for those referred by parents, mostly the under-20s. The two-page questionnaire included both open-ended and multiple-choice items, as well as some demographic questions. The purpose of the research was explained to the respondents, who were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that anonymity would be guaranteed in presenting the research results.

Sixty-two questionnaires were posted to former clients and after four weeks a reminder was sent to those who had not replied. One particular former client who had expressed dissatisfaction after the session was excluded from the survey since it would not have been tactful to recontact this person, but all others were invited to respond to the survey.

Ten questionnaires were returned as address unknown, and 27 replies were received, a return rate of 52%. Two clients declined to complete the form and it is not known what proportion of the other 23 non-returns were actually received by the addressee; it is possible many of these may have changed their location. The return rate is acceptable for a postal questionnaire, especially given that the address database came from records, rather than being current.

Eighty-nine percent of the respondents were female, and 11% were male. These former clients ranged in age from under 20 to over 50 and were evenly distributed across all age groups, with the exception of the over-50s, who were few. Eighty-five percent were Pākehā/European, and the other 15% identified as both Māori and Pākehā. No clients were Pacific Islanders or Asian.

### **Results**

#### *Why they came*

Asked their reasons for coming to the agency, 63% of clients indicated that they had wanted to address issues of career choice, while 37% were focused on career change,

and several indicated both reasons. Alternative reasons were being "bored, not going anywhere" at school, "dissatisfaction in current career without understanding why," and "loss of direction." One respondent said she was sent by a parent.

### *Helpfulness of the session*

All but one (97%) of the clients indicated that the session had been helpful. The one who did not answer in the affirmative wrote "sort of." Two modified their "yes" responses, one referring to clarifying "*some* things" and another writing "a little."

### *Useful aspects of the session*

In an open-ended question, clients were asked what was useful about the session. The replies were analysed into categories, many fitting into more than one.

### *The counselling process*

The most common reference (82%) was to some quality of the counselling process. Specifically, clients mentioned being able to identify their issues, talk through the issues, being affirmed in their own ideas, or getting good advice. Other responses mentioned increased confidence; "thinking about aspects of myself I wouldn't normally have thought of;" "redefined my choices as more positive;" and "looking at some personal issues." Three clients were satisfied that the counsellor had recognised that career counselling was inappropriate at the time, and all three subsequently took time out and reassessed their options.

### *Understanding career options*

The next most common type of usefulness was help with understanding career options (33%). Client responses included comments such as "helped me realise other career areas that I had not even thought about;" "finding out there were so many different things to do in life;" and "focusing my ideas and options." Twenty-six percent said that the session helped them with decision-making, often by giving them confidence and affirming their choices. For example, one client went on to start his own business, continued his trade work, and is looking for contract tutoring, i.e., he is developing a work portfolio.

### *Career strategies*

Twenty-two percent of clients said that the session gave them help with career strategies. Examples included affirmation of job-seeking skills, a decision to look for short-term work yet maintain long-term goals, the provision of useful books on career path changes, and good directions. One client, for example, had come back from

overseas and was unable to find the work he had previously been doing in Hamilton. He found it useful that the counsellor was “telling me to get up and attack rather than waiting for something to come to me!” He kept looking until he found the employment he wanted.

#### *Related matters regarding work and career to other aspects of life*

Fifteen percent of clients said that the session was useful in that it helped them relate work and career matters to other parts of their lives. One client who identified as suffering from burnout came to realise “I was not able to make a decision at the time and needed time out to reflect.” Another realised that she needed to balance her life interests and not to expect satisfaction just from work.

#### *Qualities of the counsellor*

The remaining categories included reference to qualities of the counsellor (15%). Comments included: “someone who understood me;” “someone skilled listening to me for over an hour;” “I was enabled to relax. I felt no pressure to make a decision and this actually made the decision easier;” “the feeling of being lost was alleviated;” and “I felt comfortable talking to Rosemary.” At the end of the survey form, where respondents were invited to add comments, many more remarked that the personal qualities of the counsellor had been helpful.

#### *Affirmation of the client’s past experience*

This was also mentioned by some (11%), through comments such as “opened my eyes at what I can do” and “I was able to see what skills and experience I had gathered.” Another realised that although her present career was unsuitable, she had not wasted time and could still benefit from building on that path.

Finally, one person referred to the theme of *planning over the life course*, saying that he recognised that there was time to develop different careers.

#### *Client changes*

Clients were asked whether they had made short-term and/or long-term changes as a result of the session.

#### *Short-term changes*

Fifty-nine percent had made short-term changes and their responses were categorised—with the most common responses listed first—into *initiatives*, such as applying for or enrolling in courses and job-search initiatives; *changes of direction*, such as going for a job rather than to university, choosing different university courses, and

starting a business; and *work on oneself*, such as having time out or seeking further counselling. One client referred to a changed *state of mind*: she “felt directed—happy.”

#### *Long-term changes*

An even greater percentage of clients (67%) recognised long-term changes as a result of the session. Their responses were categorised as *education and training decisions*, such as moving cities to attend university, choosing a different career path by enrolling for different courses, and embarking on part-time study; *finding a new job*: one client had found “the perfect job” and another had kept looking until he had found what he wanted; *focusing on personal issues rather than career*, such as a client who decided she was ready to leave her job and go travelling, another who decided not to attend polytechnic next year, and one who made the decision to leave school teaching because of burnout; *changes in current work situation*: one client decided to change things at their present workplace and their career-change plans long term, while another set up his own business; and feeling that they now had *better coping skills*.

#### *Client perspectives on the one session*

Seventy-eight percent (21 clients) thought that they would have benefited from an extra session. The most common reasons were: to explore career interests (37%); examine career information (33%); explore values relating to work and career (26%); look at strategies in the workplace (19%), and explore the initial problem further (2%). Other reasons given included “to ensure I remain focused.”

In contrast, 22% gave reasons for thinking that they had not needed another session, including: “not at the moment;” the session did not help as the person (who had been sent by her mother) already knew where she wanted to go; and “you gave me a push in the right direction.”

The question “What deterred you from further sessions?” elicited a slightly different picture as 37% (10) said that there was no need, in contrast to the 22% who responded to the previous question by saying that they would not have benefited from another session. Other deterrents included cost (48%), and lack of time (22%). Two clients had received help elsewhere, though none expressed discomfort with the counselling process. Open-ended responses included “had to work through my own process to make decisions” and “I needed to take time to reassess the situation.”

#### *Client satisfaction with the session*

All but one of the clients, as noted earlier, said they had been helped by the session. A

further question, using a five-point scale, showed that 67% were satisfied with the help they had received (rating it as either 1 or 2); 30% of clients gave the session a 3; no one gave it a 4, and one person was very dissatisfied, giving the session a 5.

In correlating answers to this question with the earlier questions about changes made, it was found that the clients who rated the session highly were more likely to have made long- or short-term changes as a result of the session. Three-quarters of those who rated it positively had made short-term changes, compared with only a quarter of those who gave it a medium rating; results for long-term change were similar. More of those who rated the session highly would have liked a further session, but so would half of those who gave the session a medium rating.

### **Case studies**

Since clients had named themselves on the survey form, Rosemary was able to examine their responses alongside information from her client records. As well, she could recall every session. Several selected examples (using pseudonyms) illustrate clients' experiences.

Jen, an 18-year-old, was still at school. She explained her reason for seeking counselling: "I wanted to know what I was doing still at school because [I was] bored not going anywhere." What did she find useful about the session? "I found I had a lot in common with you [Rosemary]. Listening to the way you were running your own farm and counselling and seemed happy. It gave me inspiration. Just the talking in general and finding out that there were so many different things to do in life." Jen got a job at a mortgage brokers where she is training and can go "up the ladder." She is very happy with her choice.

Tom, a 17-year-old seventh former, was studying English, Geography, Home Economics, Photography, and Art History. He was from a professional family and came voluntarily, after being encouraged by his mother, to discuss his choice of career. He loved taking photos, had been working in a photo laboratory and in a plant nursery, and was feeling stuck because he did not want to go to university. During the interview he realised he did not need to learn photography but did need to get a photo portfolio together and to learn about media production. On follow-up, he had found a job working for a skateboarding magazine and had been busy. He found the counselling session helpful in that "I could discuss my work actions with someone who understood me. It helped me to realise to look for short-term work but maintain my long-term ideas."

Alex, a 50-year-old tradesman at the top of his profession, came to discuss career change. The session "gave reassurance and defined my choices down to a more positive way. Also good directions as to how to achieve my ideas." On the questionnaire he indicated that he had started his own business and was still carrying on in his trade, while seeking other professional work.

Mary, a solo parent with several children, living in a rural town, had a master's degree in science and was already involved in further university study. For her, the counselling session "reinforced the way my thinking had been developing prior to advice. It gave me a further list of books to read on career path changes. It emphasised the need for balance over all life interests: don't expect them all just from work." Although her response sounds positive, Mary may have benefited from a further session. She felt her own realisations were affirmed, but she really wanted something more. As a single parent, further sessions were not manageable at that time.

## **Discussion**

The results of this small survey are consistent with other research into single-session counselling (Stalker et al., 2012) in clearly demonstrating that a single session of career counselling can have positive outcomes for the majority of clients. Most respondents could point to short- and long-term changes as a result. The single session can provide reassurance, clarification, and energising; it can enable clients to identify options, and can point toward new directions. For some, its importance lies in locating career issues in the context of the rest of their lives; for others it offers encouragement to continue and expand the work on their careers that they are already doing.

Most clients, especially those who identified changes that they had made as a result of the session, felt nevertheless that more than one session would have been beneficial. They were deterred for a number of reasons, the most common of which was the cost.

From Rosemary's perspective, those who needed further sessions were those who had never thought of themselves in terms of their transferable skills, values, or attributes. They may never have thought of their marketability, had not really considered becoming qualified, and therefore institutional learning may have seemed foreign. Practice experience indicates that for anyone going through life/work transitions, a series of counselling sessions may often be advisable. Career counselling can serve as a source of support and focus while they are experiencing the challenges of transition and working through barriers such as injury or diminished self-esteem.

What are the implications of this survey for practice? Firstly, it needs to be

recognised that a single session is likely to be the most common form of career counselling, and practitioners need to prepare for the session accordingly. Single sessions are often more successful than many counsellors may think. Whatever the practice setting, the fact that a client does not return for further sessions does not necessarily indicate that the first—and only—session was unhelpful; indeed, the reverse may be the case. Manthei's (2007a) research into the different perspectives of clients and counsellors cautions against making assumptions about clients' experiences and perceptions.

It is also important, however, that career counsellors encourage some of their clients to return for further sessions. As financial concerns are clearly a barrier, perhaps as a profession we need to consider what we might do—through exploring funding avenues, for example—to address some of the impediments blocking clients' access to additional counselling.

Finally, this small study illustrates the value of practice-based research, particularly in the context of private practice, and the dissemination of the results in the professional and academic arena. Echoing Manthei's (2004) call for counsellors to become involved in research, we hope that the report of this research project will encourage others to initiate the development of further research as well as debate, and ultimately contribute to the knowledge that informs effective practice. Research does involve an investment of time and money, and for Rosemary this study was both a personal sacrifice and a commitment to the clients who agreed to be part of the project. The second author, Hilary, played a vital part in assisting with the analysis of the data. Collaboration between practitioners and academics, or others with such skills, needs to be encouraged.

Each questionnaire represented a one-hour counselling session, and working with the information clients provided therefore had personal meaning for Rosemary. Receiving the feedback from clients was therefore scary, but also exciting and fulfilling. The information from the study has enhanced her work in facilitating the single session and has given her a more positive perspective of its value. Our hope is that this article will inform colleagues' perception of career counselling, and support the value of single sessions, as well as the value of training and employing credentialed practitioners. We also hope this study will encourage the development of further practice-based research not only in career counselling but in all practice contexts.

## Endnote

1 Available from mmerton@ihug.co.nz

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