

The Counselor as a Human Being: A Personal Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to elicit careful consideration regarding life-experience and personal mental health on the part of counselors and counselors-in-training. Counselors-in-training can gain much insight by considering their motivation for entering this profession. They need to assess their ability to enter the counseling relationship with a priority on the client's empowerment, and not personal fulfillment. Careful consideration must be given to the client as a multicultural being, requiring the counselor to have an awareness and willingness to invest themselves in their client's experience. Counselors-in-training should strive for personal mental wellness and an ongoing pursuit of emotional expansion.

It is important that counselors and counselors-in-training be of sound mental health while working as professionals in this field. There are a number of reasons that professional counselors should be aware of their own emotional and mental wellness before seeking to treat others. As counselors we are modeling for our clients healthy personal adjustment patterns; in doing so we make space for them to discover their own journey to wellness. When our modeling is unhealthy or our psyche is lacking clarity we are exposing our clients to patterns, emotions, and behavior that will not serve them and may have the potential for harm.

There are some dysfunctional personal adjustment patterns and impairments that could be troublesome for counselors and counselors-in-training. First, I feel that it is important to point out that counselors are not immune to disruptive life challenges, health concerns, and mental health issues. I believe that a therapist has the potential to be effective with their clients as long as they are not in a chronic or acute phase of their disorder, and that their disorder does not inhibit clear, rational thinking or judgment.

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The challenge lies in one's determination to attain and maintain wellness. As counselors possessing university degrees we have had the education and accumulated knowledge to understand the difference between adequate mental wellness and a lack thereof. Counselors must make a commitment to be vigilant about assessing their own fitness as a therapist on a continuous basis. I feel that this can be best supported and achieved by the profession as a whole by making it 'normal' (expected and acceptable) to embrace professionals with managed mental illnesses to practice, to provide guidance and counseling for one another, use continuing education as a means to support wellness within the counselor, and providing honest feedback to one another (and to a colleague's superior when they are not responsive and at risk) when mental wellness is in question for a colleague.

Beyond typical psychological diagnoses, there are other dysfunctional personality adjustment patterns that do not serve our clients. One area of adjustment that seems basic in nature is a counselor's level of optimism or hopefulness. A counselor that maintains a negative outlook or approach may not be able to promote a positive response to treatment, nor possess the ability to provide a foundation from which the client can gain movement toward wellness. Additionally, it has been my observation that clients have the potential to put disproportionate value into their therapist's words and suggestions, and we have a responsibility to provide words that reflect a positive outlook and appropriate counsel. When a counselor is not in a state of proper psychological functioning this could lead to incorrect assessment and diagnosis, misuse or improperly executed treatment techniques, and the disillusionment of the client toward counselors and their ability to achieve their own healing and wellness. The lack of proper functioning on the part of the therapist (especially with acute phases of mental disorders) could potentially lead to unsound therapy and elicit negative outcomes in their clients.

Having noted the ways that dysfunctional personality adjustment can inhibit proper counseling abilities, I think it is only fair to acknowledge the benefits of experiencing dysfunction, moving through it, and coming out on the other side with

appreciation, expansion, and a deeper sense of wellness. This sentiment is eloquently conveyed in a quote by Richard Bach, "There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands." I believe it is in the life challenges we face that we find more of our true and powerful selves. After all, if we as professional counselors are to encourage therapy for our clients wouldn't it be helpful to be familiar with the therapeutic territory we are entering? It is not my opinion that counselors should have had the same experiences as their clients as to the depth and specifics of their dysfunction to be fully available to them. However, I do believe we can provide greater empathy for our client's struggles, and a confidence in the power of therapy, transition, and availability of optimal outcomes if we ourselves have experienced personal life challenges and possibly therapy as well.

Counselors-in-training would also benefit from assessing their motivation for entering the counseling profession. I believe that the client's needs have to be given the highest priority. It would be a mistake to use one's counseling practice to process personal problems, to feed one's ego by flaunting knowledge or superiority in the client-counselor relationship, or to be anything less than fully available with unconditional positive regard for one's client. An easy trap to fall victim to is becoming the client's "savior". This behavior is likely to come from a motivation to render help, but through the counselor's own inability to simply witness personal struggle the counselor takes the power to heal out of their client's locus of control. In this case, the therapist may experience personal satisfaction, and more expedient results in the moment, yet this is unfortunately at the client's expense. Furthermore, counselors have to be skilled listeners that can set aside selfish cognitions. It is valuable for the counselor to remain open to the information and experiences that come into the therapy session, and allow diagnostic considerations to follow. I believe the counselor is there to empower and support the client in their struggle, to find solutions along the way, and to place value on this process as this is where real change occurs. This idea is best conveyed in a quote by M. Scott Peck, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived."

Another area that may impede the counselor's ability to serve their clientele

adequately would be prejudice or lack of a multicultural view. Effective counselors must broaden their scope of experience and thinking to accommodate clients with all types of backgrounds and orientations. This essentially relies upon the ability to suspend judgment and remain the observer of another person's situation. It is from this vantage point that the counselor can provide empathy, remain connected with the client, and be of most value in supporting change for the client. A deficiency in a counselor's capacity to engage in this way, either through negligence or disinterest, can truly inhibit the progress of the client, if not cause them distress and harm.

Counselors-in-training can adhere to healthy personal adjustment patterns as a means of impairment prevention and remediation. It is important that we continue to evolve along our own paths of personal improvement while tending to our careers as counselors. We can become in tune with our own internal dialogue which can act as a barometer for our personal balance and adjustment. It is also important to give attention to any significant change that we notice about our physical state, our routines, and any other factor that may precipitate negative outcomes in our personal well-being. Personal adjustment is so vital to our work as counselors. I like to think of putting myself inside a personal protective bubble using creative imagery to mentally rehearse my personal power to choose what I allow into my space while providing self-love and acceptance within. In this way I am able to give myself permission to exert self-preserving actions that guard against the potential harmful effects of outside influences. These common sense areas of care should not be overlooked because of their simplicity. It is important to give yourself plenty of sleep, proper nutrition, personal time, as well as to replenish whatever may be depleted in an effort to "fill your proverbial cup" (i.e. giving yourself gifts of comfort and joy). If this is unknown to the counselor then a rigorous inventory should be made to discover it. In other words, we should offer ourselves the love and guidance that we would offer to our clients, our family, just as we would for a precious child.

Counselors should protect themselves from the harmful effects of negativity and heightened emotionality that comes from listening intently to our client's emotion filled

concerns. We can do this by remembering to remain the observer of our clients and what they share during counseling. As an observer we can witness the client without identifying with them. This distance will aid us in treating our clients as well as with not becoming burdened by their problems and with pitfalls of our profession which can lead to “burn-out“.

I believe it is exceedingly important to remember that although we are counselors we are also human beings. Just like the rest of the population our lives will be filled with a wide range of experiences, and some will challenge us. Counselors will do well to be in touch with their own internal balance and sense of well-being. When one is in tune with oneself in this way, one can be aware of any shifts that would take them out of alignment. Noticing the more subtle changes will allow the counselor to seek service, treatment, or utilize self-care to regain a sense of well-being. Managing the small things in a timely manner, and being cautious as a person and counselor will help to minimize the large cases of maladjustment and disruption. In the case of sudden life events we cannot always be in control of shifts in our mental health. In these cases we would need to be able to make an honest self-evaluation and take a leave of absence to tend to our own mental and physical health. This will take awareness on the part of the counselor to not only stay attentive to their own psychological well-being, but to take action with other counselors when the situation calls for it. Counselors and counselors-in-training owe it to their clients, themselves, and their profession to offer counsel from a place of wholeness - mind, body, and spirit. Mohandas Gandhi offers wisdom regarding this matter when he says, “Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy.”