

Topic 2: Elements of a Successful Therapeutic Relationship

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There are a variety of approaches a counselor can take down the path of professional mental health and I find each of them interesting in their own right, but I find myself heading toward private practice and specializing in solution-focused style methods. Although my main focus would be seeing private individuals and families, I'd also like the opportunity to collaborate with government entities such as public-school systems, police probation departments, and other state-sponsored recovery organizations that would all be looking for my own professional licensure credentials in order to feel comfortable working with me. A license in good standing would communicate to the community that I am competent and qualified to work with as a counselor. I'd like to become part of a network of mental health professionals who specialize in a wide variety of methods so that I can know who to refer a particular client to or ask advice from.

The strategies I would utilize as a licensed professional counselor would be a mix of general macro-strategies and specific micro-strategies. Some examples of what I would consider to be defined as specific micro-strategies might be using the miracle question. The "miracle question" is a useful tool for quickly getting into the information that insurance companies would want to know, and it can be framed in the following way: "Now, I want to ask you a strange question. Suppose that while you are sleeping tonight and the entire house is quiet, a miracle happens. The miracle is that the problem which brought you here is solved. However, because you are sleeping, you don't know that the miracle has happened. So, when you wake up tomorrow morning, what will be different that will tell you that a miracle has happened and the problem which brought you here is solved?" (Murdock, 2017, p.860). This kind of questioning elicits the problems from the client in a way that involves them in the process rather than simply

listing things out in a straightforward way. The client may not want to engage the problem itself head-on, but their description of the ideal may illuminate that problem without emotionally disturbing them and causing them to retreat.

A macro-strategy would be a general principle to abide by, and there are few better than the very first principle listed in the American Counseling Association's (ACA) 2014 *Code of Ethics* that states: "The primary responsibility of counselors is to respect the dignity and promote the welfare of clients" (ACA, 2014, A.1.a). This is in line with maintaining a genuinely empathetic, unconditionally positive regard for the client, and it is definitely in line with how I aspire to work as a counselor.

Other excellent macro-strategy principles can be found in the Grand Canyon University's Counselor Dispositions. The GCU Counselor Disposition description for patience is that "counselors understand the therapeutic process and respect client's efforts to gain control over their lives. Counselors encourage an environment that promotes self-empowerment and allows client's voice in the therapeutic process" (GCU, 2021). That can be a difficult one to maintain at all times under usual circumstances, but as counselors it is crucial to be patient at all times during sessions. Without the proper level of patience, a counselor will not be able to effectively listen. A personal example of this from my own learning occurred during a previous counseling course when I became offended by a Harvard administered test designed to detect biased tendencies. The results came back that I registered as slightly biased on a subject I feel strongly about in the opposite direction the test suggested. I became offended by this result, and this caused me to become emotional, which caused me to misread the assignment. I literally forgot to complete several key objectives during the assignment because I was so focused on my test results. What I learned from that experience was that, whether the test results were accurate or not, I should

never allow myself to become flustered and impatient when confronted with feedback that I don't agree with. A client from a completely different culture may possess a completely different "worldview", which can be defined as "a foundational set of assumptions, to which one commits that serves as a framework for understanding an interpreting reality and deeply shapes one's behavior" (Waddell, 2015). Often times it will likely be the case that a client will provide feedback that I don't agree with or possibly is downright offensive, but I have to understand and respect the client's current worldview and respond with poise. It is not to say I would not speak up for myself and maintain an environment of mutual respect for both myself and the client, but it is not helping anyone if the counselor reacts to feedback too emotionally.

The desire to specialize in a solution-focused methodology in no way means that active listening skills are not a core element of successful practice, and this is becoming better understood institutionally as "many medical schools now incorporate communication skill training into their curriculum" (Egan, G., & Reese, R. J., 2021, p. 98). Our text *The Skilled Helper: A Problem-Management & Opportunity-Development Approach to Helping* advocates that active and visible listening skills are important, but they must be driven by genuine respect and empathy for the client or they will come across the wrong way: "If you are not actively interested in the welfare of your client or if you resent working with a client, subtle or not-so-subtle nonverbal clues will color your behavior" (Egan, G., & Reese, R. J., 2021, p. 105)

A strong understanding of counseling theory is helpful in providing a strong underlying structure to practice. Theory can give a general direction to the therapy session that may drift aimlessly without it, and when a counselor starts to learn how to identify which particular theoretical approach would best fit their particular client's goals in any given circumstance, their practice can be fueled by the scholarship of some of the most influential and effective counselors in history. To neglect incorporating tools as valuable as these is a disservice to the client who could have greatly benefitted from sessions that are informed by

the most respected theoretical models in the field. However, every useful methodology requires effective listening skills. Effective listening skills are not optional for a professional mental health counselor. These skills are an essential element to every counseling session in every kind of theory.

References

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