

The process of counselling: Beginnings and Ends

It often seems we can't see the wood for the trees – the client may seem to be rambling around in bits of their own complex story with us trying to understand the story, their inner world that is reflected in the story, and get a sense of what the client wants to do. After a session, a counsellor may be tired and even overwhelmed with the amount of emotion and thoughts the client has been brought, only to be told next week that they are moving on to another issue! A lot of the work a client does in counselling is done outside of the sessions. It is sometimes important to see the sessions not as THE whole work but as an important catalyst.

- ❖ Deciding to come to counselling is a huge commitment to changing something or experiencing something.
- ❖ Before the client gets to each session they may rehearse what they are going to bring, only to resolve parts of it on the journey.
- ❖ After the session they may go over the story again, perhaps with other people, working on it all the time.
- ❖ Thinking over the issues that have come up in counselling may actually be the time when clients decide to change something in their lives, try it out and come back and tell the counsellor the result when they return to the sessions.

The counsellor may see change over several or many sessions. At some point, the client will decide to leave counselling.

- ❖ Perhaps the client is now able to discuss areas of their lives with close friends.
- ❖ Perhaps they are ready to make their own decisions to facilitate changes.
- ❖ Perhaps they are able to leave behind some of the painful emotional baggage they were carrying before.
- ❖ Perhaps they decide to leave counselling as it is presently too painful, but they may come back.
- ❖ Perhaps they are frustrated with the lack of 'progress' or 'direction' and decide to leave counselling.
- ❖ Perhaps they recognise that other forms of helping would be more useful for them.

Between the first session and the last may be many hours work for both counsellor and client. Person-centred work does not look for answers outside of the client's own, so defining the end point for counselling is sometimes difficult.

Simon's story:

Session 1: Simon came to counselling because he is unhappy in his work and life, and his wife suggested counselling. When he rubbished the idea she made it an ultimatum: go to counselling or the relationship is over. Simon's first session is about how he doesn't think he's the only one with a problem and how tired he is all the time. The counsellor was able to reflect how angry he felt at being made to take responsibility for the mess the marriage is in, but also how unhappy he has been at work in the previous 18 months, since a recent promotion.

Session 2: Simon was still angry he was at counselling, but talked widely about the pressure he feels to do well at work. He has always felt this pressure, since school days, and feels it is largely coming from his parents but also Sandy, his wife. The counsellor was able to reflect back the feelings he has when he thinks about the pressure he is under, and how hard he finds this to say to Sandy or his parents.

Session 3: Simon was looking forward to the session this week. He has talked for hours about his job to Sandy, who is not pressuring him to stay in his job. In fact, he now recalls she had suggested he move out of his present job several times. He also reports that he and Sandy have made love after several months of being very distant. The counsellor is able to reflect back his feelings of renewed confidence in his relationship.

Supervision: The counsellor brings work with Simon to supervision because he seems to be looking for a way to paper over the cracks. The counsellor recognises the tendency in their own life, and wants to check out what is Simon's stuff and what is the counsellor's stuff.

Session 4: Simon is very sad and reflective this week. He admits that one of the reasons he stayed in his present job is that he had been having an affair with a married woman at his firm, which she broke off some months ago. He feels bad about the relationship now, in which he frequently had to lie both to Sandy and his friend, the woman's husband. He now feels he ought to 'come clean'. The counsellor reflects his fears about this, as well as his discomfort at the memory of his relationship. The counsellor reflects back his sadness at the ending of a relationship which made him happy for some time.

Session 5: Simon is very unhappy at home, having decided not to tell Sandy yet but feeling very low. He cancels the next weeks session because he is going on a training course for work. He spoke to his mother about his unhappiness at work and found her quite supportive. Since Sandy is secure in her job, he could look around for another job. The counsellor is able to reflect back his discomfort relying on Sandy to make himself happier when he feels he has let her down.

Session 6. Simon cancels at the last moment. The counsellor gets the impression he is feeling very bad, but can't take the time to sort it out.

Session 7: Simon comes to counselling looking more positive. Sandy and he have talked openly, and she admits she guessed about the affair but didn't want to put pressure on him in case he left her for the other woman. Simon has been to the GP and is now on sick leave, and he and Sandy are talking every day about their future. He has two interviews for new jobs. The counsellor is able to reflect on this openness in the relationship that Simon feels is positive.

Session 8: Simon's boss has offered him a different post in the company, something more in keeping with his qualifications and interests. Simon is pleased but cautious, Sandy is living with her parents while she sorts out her feelings. He is having a lot of conversations with her over the phone, 'like a couple of teenagers'. Her parents are very angry but his are very supportive. The counsellor is able to reflect on the changes in the way Simon is communicating with people in his life.

Supervision: The counsellor mentions Simon in supervision because they are concerned that Simon may be depressed, although this hasn't been mentioned by either in session. The tiredness, the feeling of hopelessness is quite bad in the sessions, and the counsellor feels uneasy afterwards. The supervisor recommends letting Simon decide that for himself and the counsellor doesn't feel that Simon is in danger. The counsellor decides that if Simon ends the counselling they will mention seeking help from the GP, as a suggestion.

Session 9: Simon has accepted that he is depressed and has been so for many months. His GP has prescribed anti-depressants and Simon and Sandy are back together, at least for the moment. He has accepted his new job, and is starting to enjoy it. He feels that counselling has helped him get his life back on track, and wants to end the therapy. He recognises that he may need to come back in the future. The counsellor recalls how he felt in the first session, compared with how he feels now. Simon feels that the sessions enabled him to talk openly, even tearfully, with a non-judgemental person who didn't try to tell him what to do.