



The Counselor: Person and Professional

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the characteristics of the counselor as a therapeutic person.
2. Understand the benefits of seeking personal counseling as a counselor.
3. Explain the concept of *bracketing* and what is involved in managing a counselor's personal values.
4. Explain how values relate to identifying goals in counseling.
5. Understand the role of diversity issues in the therapeutic relationship.
6. Describe what is involved in acquiring competency as a multicultural counselor.
7. Identify issues faced by beginning therapists.



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Introduction

One of the most important instruments you have to work with as a counselor is yourself as a person. In preparing for counseling, you will acquire knowledge about the theories of personality and psychotherapy, learn assessment and intervention techniques, and discover the dynamics of human behavior. Such knowledge and skills are essential, but by themselves they are not sufficient for establishing and maintaining effective therapeutic relationships. To every therapy session we bring our human qualities and the experiences that have influenced us. In my judgment, this human dimension is one of the most powerful influences on the therapeutic process.

A good way to begin your study of contemporary counseling theories is by reflecting on the personal issues raised in this chapter. By remaining open to self-evaluation, you not only expand your awareness of self but also build the foundation for developing your abilities and skills as a professional. The theme of this chapter is that the *person* and the *professional* are intertwined facets that cannot be separated in reality. We know, clinically and scientifically, that the person of the therapist and the therapeutic relationship contribute to therapy outcome at least as much as the particular treatment method used (Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010; Elkins, 2016; Norcross, 2011).



Visit CengageBrain.com or watch the DVD for the video program on Chapter 2, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy: The Case of Stan and Lectrettes*. I suggest that you view the brief lecture for each chapter prior to reading the chapter.

The Counselor as a Therapeutic Person

Counseling is an intimate form of learning, and it demands a practitioner who is willing to be an authentic person in the therapeutic relationship. It is within the context of such a person-to-person connection that the client experiences growth. If we hide behind the safety of our professional role, our clients will likely keep themselves hidden from us. If we strive for technical expertise alone, and leave our own reactions and self out of our work, the result is likely to be ineffective counseling. Our own genuineness can have a significant effect on our relationship with our clients. If we are willing to look at our lives and make the changes we want, we can model that process by the way we reveal ourselves and respond to our clients. If we are inauthentic, we will have difficulty establishing a working alliance with our clients. If we model authenticity by engaging in appropriate self-disclosure, our clients will tend to be honest with us as well.

I believe that who the psychotherapist is directly relates to his or her ability to establish and maintain effective therapy relationships with clients. But what does the research reveal about the role of the counselor as a person and the therapeutic relationship on psychotherapy outcome? Abundant research indicates the centrality of the person of the therapist as a primary factor in successful therapy. The *person* of the psychotherapist is inextricably intertwined with the outcome of psychotherapy (see Elkins, 2016; Lambert, 2011; Norcross & Lambert, 2011; Norcross & Wampold, 2011). Clients place more value on the personality of the therapist than on the

specific techniques used. Indeed, evidence-based psychotherapy relationships are critical to the psychotherapy endeavor.

Techniques themselves have limited importance in the therapeutic process. Wampold (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of many research studies on therapeutic effectiveness and found that the personal and interpersonal components are essential to effective psychotherapy, whereas techniques have relatively little effect on therapeutic outcome. The *contextual factors*—the alliance, the relationship, the personal and interpersonal skills of the therapist, client agency, and extra-therapeutic factors—are the primary determinants of therapeutic outcome. This research supports what humanistic psychologists have maintained for years: “It is not theories and techniques that heal the suffering client but the human dimension of therapy and the ‘meetings’ that occur between therapist and client as they work together” (Elkins, 2009, p. 82). In short, both the *therapy relationship* and the *therapy methods* used influence the outcomes of treatment, but it is essential that the methods used support the therapeutic relationship being formed with the client.

Personal Characteristics of Effective Counselors

Particular personal qualities and characteristics of counselors are significant in creating a therapeutic alliance with clients. My views regarding these personal characteristics are supported by research on this topic (Norcross, 2011; Skovholt & Jennings, 2004; Sperry & Carlson, 2011). I do not expect any therapist to fully exemplify all the traits described in the list that follows. Rather, the willingness to struggle to become a more therapeutic person is the crucial variable. This list is intended to stimulate you to examine your own ideas about what kind of person can make a significant difference in the lives of others.

- *Effective therapists have an identity.* They know who they are, what they are capable of becoming, what they want out of life, and what is essential.
- *Effective therapists respect and appreciate themselves.* They can give and receive help and love out of their own sense of self-worth and strength. They feel adequate with others and allow others to feel powerful with them.
- *Effective therapists are open to change.* They exhibit a willingness and courage to leave the security of the known if they are not satisfied with the way they are. They make decisions about how they would like to change, and they work toward becoming the person they want to become.
- *Effective therapists make choices that are life oriented.* They are aware of early decisions they made about themselves, others, and the world. They are not the victims of these early decisions, and they are willing to revise them if necessary. They are committed to living fully rather than settling for mere existence.
- *Effective therapists are authentic, sincere, and honest.* They do not hide behind rigid roles or facades. Who they are in their personal life and in their professional work is congruent.
- *Effective therapists have a sense of humor.* They are able to put the events of life in perspective. They have not forgotten how to laugh, especially at their own foibles and contradictions.

- *Effective therapists make mistakes and are willing to admit them.* They do not dismiss their errors lightly, yet they do not choose to dwell on misery.
- *Effective therapists generally live in the present.* They are not riveted to the past, nor are they fixated on the future. They are able to experience and be present with others in the “now.”
- *Effective therapists appreciate the influence of culture.* They are aware of the ways in which their own culture affects them, and they respect the diversity of values espoused by other cultures. They are sensitive to the unique differences arising out of social class, race, sexual orientation, and gender.
- *Effective therapists have a sincere interest in the welfare of others.* This concern is based on respect, care, trust, and a real valuing of others.
- *Effective therapists possess effective interpersonal skills.* They are capable of entering the world of others without getting lost in this world, and they strive to create collaborative relationships with others. They readily entertain another person’s perspective and can work together toward consensual goals.
- *Effective therapists become deeply involved in their work and derive meaning from it.* They can accept the rewards flowing from their work, yet they are not slaves to their work.
- *Effective therapists are passionate.* They have the courage to pursue their dreams and passions, and they radiate a sense of energy.
- *Effective therapists are able to maintain healthy boundaries.* Although they strive to be fully present for their clients, they don’t carry the problems of their clients around with them during leisure hours. They know how to say no, which enables them to maintain balance in their lives.

This picture of the characteristics of effective therapists might appear unrealistic. Who could be all those things? Certainly I do not fit this bill! Do not think of these personal characteristics from an all-or-nothing perspective; rather, consider them on a continuum. A given trait may be highly characteristic of you, at one extreme, or it may be very uncharacteristic of you, at the other extreme. I have presented this picture of the therapeutic person with the hope that you will examine it and develop your own concept of what personality traits you think are essential to strive for to promote your own personal growth. For a more detailed discussion of the person of the counselor and the role of the therapeutic relationship in outcomes of treatments, see *Psychotherapy Relationships That Work* (Norcross, 2011), *How Master Therapists Work: Exploring Change From the First Through the Last Session and Beyond* (Sperry & Carlson, 2011), and *Master Therapists: Exploring Expertise in Therapy and Counseling* (Skovholt & Jennings, 2004).

Personal Therapy for the Counselor

Discussion of the counselor as a therapeutic person raises another issue **LO2** debated in counselor education: Should people be required to participate in counseling or therapy before they become practitioners? My view is that counselors can benefit greatly from the experience of being clients at some time, a view that is supported by research. This experience can be obtained before your training, during it,

or both, but I strongly support some form of self-exploration as vital preparation in learning to counsel others.

The vast majority of mental health professionals have experienced personal therapy, typically on several occasions (Geller, Norcross, & Orlinsky, 2005b). A review of research studies on the outcomes and impacts of the psychotherapist’s own psychotherapy revealed that more than 90% of mental health professionals report satisfaction and positive outcomes from their own counseling experiences (Orlinsky, Norcross, Ronnestad, & Wiseman, 2005). Orlinsky and colleagues suggest that personal therapy contributes to the therapist’s professional work in the following three ways: (1) as part of the therapist’s training, personal therapy offers a model of therapeutic practice in which the trainee experiences the work of a more experienced therapist and learns experientially what is helpful or not helpful; (2) a beneficial experience in personal therapy can further enhance a therapist’s interpersonal skills that are essential to skillfully practicing therapy; and (3) successful personal therapy can contribute to a therapist’s ability to deal with the ongoing stresses associated with clinical work.

In his research on personal therapy for mental health professionals, Norcross (2005) states that lasting lessons practitioners learn from their personal therapy experiences pertain to interpersonal relationships and the dynamics of psychotherapy. Some of these lessons learned are the centrality of warmth, empathy, and the personal relationship; having a sense of what it is like to be a therapy client; valuing patience and tolerance; and appreciating the importance of learning how to deal with transference and countertransference. By participating in personal therapy, counselors can prevent their potential future countertransference from harming clients.

Through our work as therapists, we can expect to confront our own unexplored personal blocks such as loneliness, power, death, and intimate relationships. This does not mean that we need to be free of conflicts before we can counsel others, but we should be aware of what these conflicts are and how they are likely to affect us as persons and as counselors. For example, if we have great difficulty dealing with anger or conflict, we may not be able to assist clients who are dealing with anger or with relationships in conflict.

When I began counseling others, old wounds were opened and feelings I had not explored in depth came to the surface. It was difficult for me to encounter a client’s depression because I had failed to come to terms with the way I had escaped from my own depression. I did my best to cheer up depressed clients by talking them out of what they were feeling, mainly because of my own inability to deal with such feelings. In the years I worked as a counselor in a university counseling center, I frequently wondered what I could do for my clients. I often had no idea what, if anything, my clients were getting from our sessions. I couldn’t tell if they were getting better, staying the same, or getting worse. It was very important to me to note progress and see change in my clients. Because I did not see immediate results, I had many doubts about whether I could become an effective counselor. What I did not understand at the time was that my clients needed to struggle to find their own answers. To see my clients feel better quickly was *my need*, not theirs, for then I would know that I was helping them. It never occurred to me that clients often feel worse for a time as they give up their defenses and open themselves to their pain. My early

experiences as a counselor showed me that I could benefit by participating in further personal therapy to better understand how my personal issues were affecting my professional work. I realized that periodic therapy, especially early in one's career, can be most useful.

Personal therapy can be instrumental in healing the healer. If student counselors are not actively involved in the pursuit of their own healing and growth, they will probably have considerable difficulty entering the world of a client. As counselors, can we take our clients any further than we have gone ourselves? If we are not committed personally to the value of examining our own life, how can we inspire clients to examine their lives? By becoming clients ourselves, we gain an experiential frame of reference with which to view ourselves. This provides a basis for understanding and compassion for our clients, for we can draw on our own memories of reaching impasses in our therapy, of both wanting to go farther and at the same time resisting change. Our own therapy can help us develop patience with our patients! We learn what it feels like to deal with anxieties that are aroused by self-disclosure and self-exploration and how to creatively facilitate deeper levels of self-exploration in clients. As we increase our self-awareness through our own therapy, we gain increased appreciation for the courage our clients display in their therapeutic journey. Gold and Hilsenroth (2009) studied graduate clinicians and found that those who had personal therapy felt more confident and were more in agreement with their clients on the goals and tasks of treatment than were those who did not experience personal therapy. They further found that graduate clinicians who had experienced personal therapy were able to develop strong agreement with their clients on the goals and tasks of treatment. Participating in a process of self-exploration can reduce the chances of assuming an attitude of arrogance or of being convinced that we are totally healed. Our own therapy helps us avoid assuming a stance of superiority over others and makes it less likely that we would treat people as objects to be pitied or disrespected. Indeed, experiencing counseling as a client is very different from merely reading about the counseling process.

For a comprehensive discussion of personal therapy for counselors, see *The Psychotherapist's Own Psychotherapy: Patient and Clinician Perspectives* (Geller, Norcross, & Orlinsky, 2005a).

The Counselor's Values and the Therapeutic Process

As alluded to in the previous section, the importance of self-exploration for counselors carries over to the values and beliefs we hold. My experience in teaching and supervising students of counseling shows me how crucial it is that students be aware of their values, of where and how they acquired them, and of how their values can influence their interventions with clients.

The Role of Values in Counseling

Our values are core beliefs that influence how we act, both in our personal **LO3** and our professional lives. Personal values influence how we view counseling and the manner in which we interact with clients, including the way we conduct client assessments, our views of the goals of counseling, the interventions we choose, the

topics we select for discussion in a counseling session, how we evaluate progress, and how we interpret clients' life situations.

Although total objectivity cannot be achieved, we can strive to avoid being encapsulated by our own worldview. We need to guard against the tendency to use our power to influence clients to accept our values; persuading clients to accept or adopt our value system is not a legitimate outcome of counseling. From my perspective, the counselor's role is to create a climate in which clients can examine their thoughts, feelings, and actions and to empower them to arrive at their own solutions to problems they face. The counseling task is to assist individuals in finding answers that are most congruent with their own values. It is not beneficial to provide advice or to give clients your answers to their questions about life.

You may not agree with certain of your clients' values, but you need to respect their right to hold divergent values from yours. This is especially true when counseling clients who have a different cultural background and perhaps do not share your own core cultural values. Your role is to provide a safe and inviting environment in which clients can explore the congruence between their values and their behavior. If clients acknowledge that what they are doing is not getting them what they want, it is appropriate to assist them in developing new ways of thinking and behaving to help them move closer to their goals. This is done with full respect for their right to decide which values they will use as a framework for living. Individuals seeking counseling need to clarify their own values and goals, make informed decisions, choose a course of action, and assume responsibility and accountability for the decisions they make.

Managing your personal values so that they do not contaminate the counseling process is referred to as "bracketing." Counselors are expected to set aside their personal beliefs and values when working with a wide range of clients (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). Your core values may differ in many ways from the core values of your clients, and they will bring you a host of problems framed by their own worldview. Some clients may have felt rejected by others or suffered from discrimination, and they should not be exposed to further discrimination by counselors who refuse to render services to them because of differing values (Herlihy, Hermann, & Greden, 2014).

Counselors must have the ability to work with a range of clients with diverse worldviews and values. Counselors may impose their values either directly or indirectly. **Value imposition** refers to counselors directly attempting to define a client's values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. It is unethical for counselors to impose their values in the therapeutic relationship. The American Counseling Association's (ACA, 2014) *Code of Ethics* is explicit regarding this matter:

Personal Values. Counselors are aware of—and avoid imposing—their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Counselors respect the diversity of clients, trainees, and research participants and seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor's values are inconsistent with the client's goals or are discriminatory in nature. (Standard A.4.b.)

Value exploration is at the heart of why many counselor education programs encourage or require personal therapy for counselors in training. Your personal therapy sessions provide an opportunity for you to examine your beliefs and values and to explore your motivations for wanting to share your belief system.

Clients are in a vulnerable position and require understanding and support from a counselor rather than judgment. It can be burdensome for clients to be saddled with your disclosure of not being able to get beyond value differences. Clients may interpret this as a personal rejection and suffer harm as a result. Counseling is about working with clients within the framework of *their* value system. If you experience difficulties over conflicting personal values with clients, the ethical course of action is to seek supervision and learn ways to effectively manage these differences. The counseling process is not about your personal values; it is about the values and needs of your clients. Your task is to help clients explore and clarify their beliefs and apply their values to solving their problems (Herlihy & Corey, 2015d).

The Role of Values in Developing Therapeutic Goals

Who should establish the goals of counseling? Almost all theories are in **LO4** agreement that it is largely the client's responsibility to decide upon goals, collaborating with the therapist as therapy proceeds. Counselors have general goals, which are reflected in their behavior during the therapy session, in their observations of the client's behavior, and in the interventions they make. The general goals of counselors must be congruent with the personal goals of the client.

Setting goals is inextricably related to values. The client and the counselor need to explore what they hope to obtain from the counseling relationship, whether they can work with each other, and whether their goals are compatible. Even more important, it is essential that the counselor be able to understand, respect, and work within the framework of the client's world rather than forcing the client to fit into the therapist's scheme of values.

In my view, therapy ought to begin with an exploration of the client's expectations and goals. Clients initially tend to have vague ideas of what they expect from therapy. They may be seeking solutions to problems, they may want to stop hurting, they may want to change others so they can live with less anxiety, or they may seek to be different so that some significant persons in their lives will be more accepting of them. In some cases clients have no goals; they are in the therapist's office simply because they were sent for counseling by their parents, probation officer, or teacher.

So where can a counselor begin? The initial interview can be used most productively to focus on the client's goals or lack of them. The therapist may begin by asking any of these questions: "What do you expect from counseling? Why are you here? What do you want? What do you hope to leave with? How is what you are currently doing working for you? What aspects of yourself or your life situation would you most like to change?"

When a person seeks a counseling relationship with you, it is important to cooperatively discover what this person is expecting from the relationship. If you try to figure out in advance how to proceed with a client, you may be depriving the client of the opportunity to become an active partner in her or his own therapy. Why is this person coming in for counseling? It is the client's place to decide on the goals of therapy. It is important to keep this focus in mind so that the client's agenda is addressed rather than an agenda of your own.

Becoming an Effective Multicultural Counselor

Part of the process of becoming an effective counselor involves learning how **LO5** to recognize diversity issues and shaping one's counseling practice to fit the client's worldview. It is an *ethical obligation* for counselors to develop sensitivity to cultural differences if they hope to make interventions that are consistent with the values of their clients. The therapist's role is to assist clients in making decisions that are congruent with their worldview, not to live by the therapist's values.

Diversity in the therapeutic relationship is a two-way street. As a counselor, you bring your own heritage with you to your work, so you need to recognize the ways in which cultural conditioning has influenced the directions you take with your clients. Unless the social and cultural context of clients and counselors are taken into consideration,

it is difficult to appreciate the nature of clients' struggles. Counseling students often hold values—such as making their own choices, expressing what they are feeling, being open and self-revealing, and striving for independence—that differ from the values of clients from different cultural backgrounds. Some clients may be very slow to disclose and have expectations about counseling that differ from those of therapist. Counselors need to become aware of how clients from diverse cultures may perceive them as therapists, as well as how clients may perceive the value of formal helping. It is the task of counselors to determine whether the assumptions they have made about the nature and functioning of therapy are appropriate for culturally diverse clients.

Clearly, effective counseling must take into account the impact of culture on the client's functioning, including the client's degree of acculturation. **Culture** is, quite simply, the values and behaviors shared by a group of individuals. It is important to realize that culture refers to more than ethnic or racial heritage; culture also includes factors such as age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, and socioeconomic status.

Acquiring Competencies in Multicultural Counseling

Effective counselors understand their own cultural conditioning, the cultural values of their clients, and the sociopolitical system of which they are a part. Acquiring this understanding begins with counselors' awareness of the cultural origins of any values, biases, and attitudes they may hold. Counselors from all cultural groups must examine their expectations, attitudes, biases, and assumptions about the counseling process and about persons from diverse groups. Recognizing our biases and prejudices takes courage because most of us do not want to acknowledge that we have cultural biases. Everyone has biases, but being unaware of the biased attitudes we hold is an obstacle to client care. It takes a concerted effort and vigilance to monitor our biases, attitudes, and values so that they do not interfere with establishing and maintaining successful counseling relationships.

A major part of becoming a diversity-competent counselor involves challenging the idea that the values we hold are automatically true for others. We also need to understand how our values are likely to influence our practice with diverse clients who embrace different values. Furthermore, becoming a diversity-competent practitioner is not a destination that we arrive at once and for all; rather, it is an ongoing process, a journey we take with our clients.

Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992) and Arredondo and her colleagues (1996) have developed a conceptual framework for competencies and standards in multicultural counseling. Their dimensions of competency involve three areas: (1) beliefs and attitudes, (2) knowledge, and (3) skills. For an in-depth treatment of multicultural counseling and therapy competence, refer to *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice* (Sue & Sue, 2013).

Beliefs and Attitudes First, effective counselors have moved from being culturally unaware to ensuring that their personal biases, values, or problems will not interfere with their ability to work with clients who are culturally different from them. They believe cultural self-awareness and sensitivity to one's own cultural heritage are essential for any form of helping. Counselors are aware of their positive and negative emotional reactions toward people from other racial and ethnic groups that may prove detrimental to establishing collaborative helping relationships. They seek to examine and understand the world from the vantage point of their clients. They respect clients' religious and spiritual beliefs and values. They are comfortable with differences between themselves and others in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and beliefs. Rather than maintaining that their cultural heritage is superior, they are able to accept and value cultural diversity. They realize that traditional theories and techniques may not be appropriate for all clients or for all problems. Culturally skilled counselors monitor their functioning through consultation, supervision, and further training or education.

Knowledge Second, culturally effective practitioners possess certain knowledge. They know specifically about their own racial and cultural heritage and how it affects them personally and professionally. Because they understand the dynamics of oppression, racism, discrimination, and stereotyping, they are in a position to detect their own racist attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. They understand the worldview of their clients, and they learn about their clients' cultural background. They do not impose their values and expectations on their clients from differing cultural backgrounds and avoid stereotyping clients. Culturally skilled counselors understand that external sociopolitical forces influence all groups, and they know how these forces operate with respect to the treatment of minorities. These practitioners are aware of the institutional barriers that prevent minorities from utilizing the mental health services available in their communities. They possess knowledge about the historical background, traditions, and values of the client populations with whom they work. They know about minority family structures, hierarchies, values, and beliefs. Furthermore, they are knowledgeable about community characteristics and resources. Those who are culturally skilled know how to help clients make use of indigenous support systems. In areas where they are lacking in knowledge, they seek resources to assist them. The greater their depth and breadth of knowledge of culturally diverse groups, the more likely they are to be effective practitioners.

Skills and Intervention Strategies Third, effective counselors have acquired certain skills in working with culturally diverse populations. Counselors take responsibility for educating their clients about the therapeutic process, including matters such as setting goals, appropriate expectations, legal rights, and the counselor's orientation.

Multicultural counseling is enhanced when practitioners use methods and strategies and define goals consistent with the life experiences and cultural values of their clients. Such practitioners modify and adapt their interventions to accommodate cultural differences. They do not force their clients to fit within one counseling approach, and they recognize that counseling techniques may be culture-bound. They are able to send and receive both verbal and nonverbal messages accurately and appropriately. They become actively involved with minority individuals outside the office (community events, celebrations, and neighborhood groups). They are willing to seek out educational, consultative, and training experiences to enhance their ability to work with culturally diverse client populations. They consult regularly with other multiculturally sensitive professionals regarding issues of culture to determine whether referral may be necessary.

Incorporating Culture in Counseling Practice

It is unrealistic to expect a counselor to know everything about the cultural background of a client, but some understanding of the client's cultural and ethnic background is essential. There is much to be said for letting clients teach counselors about relevant aspects of their culture. It is a good idea for counselors to ask clients to provide them with the information they will need to work effectively. Incorporating culture into the therapeutic process is not limited to working with clients from a certain ethnic or cultural background. It is critical that therapists take into account the worldview and background of *every* client. Failing to do this seriously restricts the potential impact of the therapeutic endeavor.

Counseling is by its very nature diverse in a multicultural society, so it is easy to see that there are no ideal therapeutic approaches. Instead, different theories have distinct features that have appeal for different cultural groups. Some theoretical approaches have limitations when applied to certain populations. Effective multicultural practice demands an open stance on the part of the practitioner, flexibility, and a willingness to modify strategies to fit the needs and the situation of the individual client. Practitioners who truly respect their clients will be aware of clients' hesitations and will not be too quick to misinterpret this behavior. Instead, they will patiently attempt to enter the world of their clients as much as they can. Although practitioners may not have had the same experiences as their clients, the empathy shown by counselors for the feelings and struggles of their clients is essential to good therapeutic outcomes. We are more often challenged by our differences than by our similarities to look at what we are doing.

Practical Guidelines in Addressing Culture If the counseling process is to be effective, it is essential that cultural concerns be addressed with all clients. Here are some guidelines that may increase your effectiveness when working with clients from diverse backgrounds:

- Learn more about how your own cultural background has influenced your thinking and behaving. Take steps to increase your understanding of other cultures.
- Identify your basic assumptions, especially as they apply to diversity in culture, ethnicity, race, gender, class, spirituality, religion, and

sexual orientation. Think about how your assumptions are likely to affect your professional practice.

- Examine where you obtained your knowledge about culture.
- Remain open to ongoing learning of how the various dimensions of culture may affect therapeutic work. Realize that this skill does not develop quickly or without effort.
- Be willing to identify and examine your own personal worldview and any prejudices you may hold about other racial/ethnic groups.
- Learn to pay attention to the common ground that exists among people of diverse backgrounds.
- Be flexible in applying the methods you use with clients. Don't be wedded to a specific technique if it is not appropriate for a given client.
- Remember that practicing from a multicultural perspective can make your job easier and can be rewarding for both you and your clients.

It takes time, study, and experience to become an effective multicultural counselor. Multicultural competence cannot be reduced simply to cultural awareness and sensitivity, to a body of knowledge, or to a specific set of skills. Instead, it requires a combination of all of these factors.

Issues Faced by Beginning Therapists

When you complete formal course work and begin helping clients, you will **107** be challenged to integrate and to apply what you have learned. At that point, you are likely to have some real concerns about your adequacy as a person and as a professional. Beginning therapists typically face a number of common issues as they learn how to help others. Here are some useful guidelines to assist you in your reflection on what it takes to become an effective counselor.

Dealing With Anxiety

Most beginning counselors have ambivalent feelings when meeting their first clients. A certain level of anxiety demonstrates that you are aware of the uncertainties of the future with your clients and of your abilities to really be there for them. A willingness to recognize and deal with these anxieties, as opposed to denying them, is a positive sign. That we have self-doubts is normal; it is how we deal with them that matters. One way is to openly discuss our self-doubts with a supervisor and peers. The possibilities are rich for meaningful exchanges and for gaining support from fellow interns who probably have many of the same concerns and anxieties.

Being Yourself and Self-Disclosure

If you feel self-conscious and anxious when you begin counseling, you may have a tendency to be overly concerned with what the books say and with the mechanics of how to proceed. Inexperienced therapists too often fail to appreciate the values inherent in simply being themselves. If we are able to be ourselves in our therapeutic work, and appropriately disclose our reactions in counseling sessions, we increase the chances of being authentic. It is this level of genuineness and presence

that enables us to connect with our clients and to establish an effective therapeutic relationship with them.

It is possible to err by going to extremes in two different directions. At one end are counselors who lose themselves in their fixed role and hide behind a professional facade. These counselors are so caught up in maintaining stereotyped role expectations that little of their personal self shows through. Counselors who adopt this behavior will likely remain anonymous to clients, and clients may perceive them as hiding behind a professional role.

At the other end of the spectrum is engaging in too much self-disclosure. Some counselors make the mistake of inappropriately burdening their clients with their spontaneous impressions about their clients. Judging the appropriate amount of self-disclosure can be a problem even for seasoned counselors, and it is often especially worrisome for new counselors. In determining the appropriateness of self-disclosure, consider *what* to reveal, *when* to reveal, and *how much* to reveal. It may be useful to mention something about ourselves from time to time, but we must be aware of our motivations for making ourselves known in this way. Assess the readiness of a client to hear these disclosures as well as the impact doing so might have on the client. Remain observant during any self-disclosure to get a sense of how the client is being affected by it.

The most productive form of self-disclosure is related to what is going on between the counselor and the client within the counseling session. The skill of immediacy involves revealing what we are thinking or feeling in the here and now with the client, but be careful to avoid pronouncing judgments about the client. When done in a timely way, sharing persistent reactions can facilitate therapeutic progress and improve the quality of our relationship with the client. Even when we are talking about reactions based on the therapeutic relationship, caution is necessary, and discretion and sensitivity are required in deciding what reactions we might share.

Avoiding Perfectionism

Perhaps one of the most common self-defeating beliefs with which we burden ourselves is that we must never make a mistake. Although we may well know *intellectually* that humans are not perfect, *emotionally* we often feel that there is little room for error. To be sure, you *will* make mistakes, whether you are a beginning or a seasoned therapist. If our energies are tied up presenting an image of perfection, this will affect our ability to be present for our clients. I tell students to question the notion that they should know everything and be perfectly skilled. I encourage them to share their mistakes or what they perceive as errors during their supervision meetings. Students willing to risk making mistakes in supervised learning situations and willing to reveal their self-doubts will find a direction that leads to growth.

Being Honest About Your Limitations

You cannot realistically expect to succeed with every client. It takes honesty to admit that you cannot work successfully with every client. It is important to learn *when* and *how* to make a referral for clients when your limitations prevent you from helping them. However, there is a delicate balance between learning your realistic limits and challenging what you sometimes think of as being "limits." Before deciding that you

do not have the life experiences or the personal qualities to work with a given population, try working in a setting with a population you do not intend to specialize in. This can be done through diversified field placements or visits to agencies.

Understanding Silence

Silent moments during a therapeutic session may seem like silent hours to a beginning therapist, yet this silence can have many meanings. The client may be quietly thinking about some things that were discussed earlier or evaluating some insight just acquired. The client may be waiting for the therapist to take the lead and decide what to say next, or the therapist may be waiting for the client to do this. Either the client or the therapist may be distracted or preoccupied, or neither may have anything to say for the moment. The client and the therapist may be communicating without words. The silence may be refreshing, or the silence may be overwhelming. Perhaps the interaction has been on a surface level, and both persons have some fear or hesitancy about getting to a deeper level. When silence occurs, acknowledge and explore with your client the meaning of the silence.

Dealing With Demands From Clients

A major issue that puzzles many beginning counselors is how to deal with clients who seem to make constant demands. Because therapists feel they should extend themselves in being helpful, they often burden themselves with the unrealistic idea that they should give unselfishly, regardless of how great clients' demands may be. These demands may manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Clients may want to see you more often or for a longer period than you can provide. They may want to see you socially. Some clients may expect you to continually demonstrate how much you care or demand that you tell them what to do and how to solve a problem. One way of heading off these demands is to make your expectations and boundaries clear during the initial counseling sessions or in the disclosure statement.

Dealing With Clients Who Lack Commitment

Involuntary clients may be required by a court order to obtain therapy, and you may be challenged in your attempt to establish a working relationship with them. It is possible to do effective work with mandated clients, but practitioners must begin by openly discussing the nature of the relationship. Counselors who omit preparation and do not address clients' thoughts and feelings about coming to counseling are likely to encounter resistance. It is critical that therapists not promise what they cannot or will not deliver. It is good practice to make clear the limits of confidentiality as well as any other factors that may affect the course of therapy. In working with involuntary clients, it is especially important to prepare them for the process; doing so can go a long way toward increasing their cooperation and involvement.

Tolerating Ambiguity

Many beginning therapists experience the anxiety of not seeing immediate results. They ask themselves: "Am I really doing my client any good? Is the client perhaps

getting worse?" I hope you will learn to tolerate the ambiguity of not knowing for sure whether your client is improving, at least during the initial sessions. Realize that oftentimes clients may seemingly "get worse" before they show therapeutic gains. Also, realize that the fruitful effects of the joint efforts of the therapist and the client may manifest themselves after the conclusion of therapy.

Becoming Aware of Your Countertransference

Working with clients can affect you in personal ways, and your own vulnerabilities and countertransference are bound to surface. If you are unaware of your personal dynamics, you are in danger of being overwhelmed by a client's emotional experiences. Beginning counselors need to learn how to "let clients go" and not carry around their problems until the next session. The most therapeutic thing is to be as fully present as we are able to be during the therapy hour, but to let clients assume the responsibility of their living and choosing outside of the session. If we become lost in clients' struggles and confusion, we cease being effective agents in helping them find solutions to their problems. If we accept responsibility for our clients' decisions, we are blocking rather than fostering their growth.

Countertransference, defined broadly, includes any of our projections that influence the way we perceive and react to a client. This phenomenon occurs when we are triggered into emotional reactivity, when we respond defensively, or when we lose our ability to be present in a relationship because our own issues become involved. Recognizing the manifestations of our countertransference reactions is an essential step in becoming competent counselors. Unless we are aware of our own conflicts, needs, assets, and liabilities, we can use the therapy hour more for our own purposes than for being available for our clients. Because it is not appropriate for us to use clients' time to work through our reactions to them, it is all the more important that we be willing to work on ourselves in our own sessions with another therapist, supervisor, or colleague. If we do not engage in this kind of self-exploration, we increase the danger of losing ourselves in our clients and using them to meet our unfulfilled needs.

The emotionally intense relationships we develop with clients can be expected to tap into our own unresolved problem areas. Our clients' stories and pain are bound to have an impact on us; we will be affected by their stories and can express compassion and empathy. However, we have to realize that it is their pain and not carry it for them lest we become overwhelmed by their life stories and thus render ourselves ineffective in working with them. Although we cannot completely free ourselves from any traces of countertransference or ever fully resolve all personal conflicts from the past, we can become aware of ways these realities influence our professional work. Our personal therapy can be instrumental in enabling us to recognize and manage our countertransference reactions. (This topic is explored in more depth in Chapter 4.)

Developing a Sense of Humor

Therapy is a responsible endeavor, but it need not be deadly serious. Both clients and counselors can enrich a relationship through humor. What a welcome relief when we can admit that pain is not our exclusive domain. It is important to recognize

that laughter or humor does not mean that clients are not respected or work is not being accomplished. There are times, of course, when laughter is used to cover up anxiety or to escape from the experience of facing threatening material. The therapist needs to distinguish between humor that distracts and humor that enhances the situation.

Sharing Responsibility With the Client

You might struggle with finding the optimum balance in sharing responsibility with your clients. One mistake is to assume full responsibility for the direction and outcomes of therapy. This will lead to taking from your clients their rightful responsibility of making their own decisions. It could also increase the likelihood of your early burnout. Another mistake is for you to refuse to accept the responsibility for making accurate assessments and designing appropriate treatment plans for your clients. How responsibility will be shared should be addressed early in the course of counseling. It is your responsibility to discuss specific matters such as length and overall duration of the sessions, confidentiality, general goals, and methods used to achieve goals. (Informed consent is discussed in Chapter 3.)

It is important to be alert to your clients' efforts to get you to assume responsibility for directing their lives. Many clients seek a "magic answer" as a way of escaping the anxiety of making their own decisions. It is not your role to assume responsibility for directing your clients' lives. Collaboratively designing contracts and homework assignments with your clients can be instrumental in your clients' increasingly finding direction within themselves. Perhaps the best measure of our effectiveness as counselors is the degree to which clients are able to say to us, "I appreciate what you have been to me, and because of your faith in me, and what you have taught me, I am confident that I can go it alone." Eventually, if we are effective, we will be out of business!

Declining to Give Advice

Quite often clients who are suffering come to a therapy session seeking and even demanding advice. They want more than direction; they want a wise counselor to make a decision or resolve a problem for them. However, counseling should not be confused with dispensing information. Therapists help clients discover their own solutions and recognize their own freedom to act. Even if we, as therapists, were able to resolve clients' struggles for them, we would be fostering their dependence on us. They would continually need to seek our counsel for every new twist in their difficulties. Our task is to help clients make independent choices and accept the consequences of their choices. The habitual practice of giving advice does not work toward this end.

Defining Your Role as a Counselor

One of your challenges as a counselor will be to define and clarify your professional role. As you read about the various theoretical orientations, you will discover the many different roles of counselors that are related to the various theories. As a counselor, you will likely be expected to function with a diverse range of roles.

From my perspective, the central function of counseling is to help clients recognize their own strengths, discover what is preventing them from using their resources, and clarify what kind of life they want to live. Counseling is a process by which clients are invited to look honestly at their behavior and make certain decisions about how they want to modify the quality of their life. In this framework counselors provide support and warmth, yet care enough to challenge clients so that they will be able to take the actions necessary to bring about significant change.

You will need to consider that the professional roles you assume are likely to be dependent on factors such as the client populations with whom you are working, the specific therapeutic services you are providing, the particular stage of counseling, and the setting in which you work. Your role will not be defined once and for all. You will have to reassess the nature of your professional commitments and redefine your role at various times.

Learning to Use Techniques Appropriately

When you are at an impasse with a client, you may have a tendency to look for a technique to get the sessions moving. Ideally, therapeutic techniques should evolve from the therapeutic relationship and the material presented, and they should enhance the client's awareness or suggest possibilities for experimenting with new behavior. It is imperative that you know the theoretical rationale for each technique you use, and you need to be aware that the techniques are appropriate for the goals of therapy. This does not mean that you need to restrict yourself to drawing on procedures within a single model; quite the contrary. However, it is important to avoid using techniques in a hit-or-miss fashion, to fill time, to meet your own needs, or to get things moving. Your methods need to be thoughtfully chosen as a way to help clients make therapeutic progress.

Developing Your Own Counseling Style

Be aware of any tendency to copy the style of a supervisor, therapist, or some other model. There is no one way to conduct therapy, and wide variations in approach can be effective. You will inhibit your potential effectiveness in reaching others if you attempt to imitate another therapist's style or if you fit most of your behavior during the session into the Procrustean bed of some expert's theory. Your counseling style will be influenced by your teachers, therapists, and supervisors, but don't blur your potential uniqueness by trying to imitate them. I advocate borrowing from others, yet, at the same time, doing it in a way that is distinctive to you.

Maintaining Your Vitality as a Person and as a Professional

Ultimately, your single most important instrument is the person you are, and your most powerful technique is your ability to model aliveness and realness. It is of paramount importance that we take care of ourselves, for how can we take care of others if we are not taking care of ourselves? We need to work at dealing with those factors that threaten to drain life from us and render us helpless. I encourage you to consider how you can apply the theories you will be studying to enhance your life from both a personal and a professional standpoint.

Learn to look within yourself to determine what choices you are making (and not making) to keep yourself vital. If you are aware of the factors that sap your vitality as a person, you are in a better position to prevent the condition known as *professional burnout*. You have considerable control over whether you become burned out or not. You cannot always control stressful events, but you do have a great deal of control over how you interpret and react to these events. It is important to realize that you cannot continue to give and give while getting little in return. There is a price to pay for always being available and for assuming responsibility over the lives and destinies of others. Become attuned to the subtle signs of burnout rather than waiting for a full-blown condition of emotional and physical exhaustion to set in. You would be wise to develop your own strategy for keeping yourself alive personally and professionally.

Self-monitoring is a crucial first step in self-care. If you make an honest inventory of how well you are taking care of yourself in specific domains, you will have a framework for deciding what you may want to change. By making periodic assessments of the direction of your own life, you can determine whether you are living the way you want to live. If not, decide what you are willing to actually *do to make* changes occur. By being in tune with yourself, by having the experience of centeredness and solidness, and by feeling a sense of personal power, you have the foundation for integrating your life experiences with your professional experiences. Such an awareness can provide the basis for retaining your physical and psychological vitality and for being an effective professional.

As counseling professionals, we tend to be caring people who are good at taking care of others, but often we do not treat ourselves with the same level of care. Self-care is not a luxury; it is an ethical mandate. If we neglect to care for ourselves, our clients will not be getting the best of us. If we are physically drained and psychologically depleted, we will not have much to give to those with whom we work. It is not possible to provide nourishment to our clients if we are not nourishing ourselves.

Mental health professionals often comment that they do not have time to take care of themselves. My question to them is, “Can you afford *not* to take care of yourself?” To successfully meet the demands of our professional work, we must take care of ourselves physically, psychologically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. Ideally, our self-care should mirror the care we provide for others. If we hope to have the vitality and stamina required to stay focused on our professional goals, we need to incorporate a wellness perspective into our daily living. Wellness is the result of our conscious commitment to a way of life that leads to zest, peace, vitality, and happiness.

Wellness and self-care are being given increased attention in professional journals and at professional conferences. When reading about self-care and wellness, reflect on what you can do to put what you know into action. If you are interested in learning more about therapist self-care, I highly recommend *Leaving It at the Office: A Guide to Psychotherapist Self-Care* (Norcross & Guy, 2007) and *Empathy Fatigue: Healing the Mind, Body, and Spirit of Professional Counselors* (Stebnicki, 2008). For more on the topic of the counselor as a person and as a professional, see *Creating Your Professional Path: Lessons From My Journey* (Corey, 2010).

Summary

One of the basic issues in the counseling profession concerns the significance of the counselor as a person in the therapeutic relationship. In your professional work, you are asking people to take an honest look at their lives and to make choices concerning how they want to change, so it is critical that you do this in your own life. Ask yourself questions such as “What do I personally have to offer others who are struggling to find their way?” and “Am I doing in my own life what I may be urging others to do?”

You can acquire an extensive theoretical and practical knowledge and can make that knowledge available to your clients. But to every therapeutic session you also bring yourself as a person. If you are to promote change in your clients, you need to be open to change in your own life. This willingness to attempt to live in accordance with what you teach and thus to be a positive model for your clients is what makes you a “therapeutic person.”

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