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“I need to take a hard look at my life”: A case from an Adlerian perspective.

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JIM: “I Need to Take a Hard Look at My Life”

Some Background Data

Jim, a 28 year old assistant principal in a junior high school, came to counseling because he was having problems at work and because he was dissatisfied with the relationships he had had with women as an adult. He stated that he has been an assistant principal for two years. The first year he received a few complaints about being inflexible and overbearing, but he and his principal attributed it to inexperience. In his second year, the complaints increased from both faculty and parents, and recently the principal and superintendent of the school district met with Jim to discuss the complaints. He was scheduled to meet with them in a few weeks to develop a “growth plan.” Jim stated that the meeting with the principal and superintendent was a “wake up call” and having done some reflection over the past week, he realized that many of the comments from faculty and parents were similar to ones expressed by several of the women he had dated. Consequently, he now realized he needed to take a hard look at how he related to others, although he did not know what that would entail.

Richard Watts’ Way of Working with Jim from an Adlerian Perspective

Developing and maintaining a strong, encouragement-focused counseling relationship with clients is crucial, and success in the subsequent phases of Adlerian counseling—assessment, insight, reorientation—is predicated on the development of this respectful and egalitarian relationship. I hoped to develop this kind of relationship with Jim so he would feel safe to explore and respond to what brought him to counseling.

As part of the assessment process, I discovered that Jim's father was an alcoholic and, although his parents stayed together until the father's death when Jim was 18, he remembered his parents "fought constantly." In addition, when Jim's father was drunk, his was also verbally and physically abusive to Jim's mother, Jim, and his younger brother. Jim recalled that as early as first grade he experienced the expectation that he was to take care of his mother and, in many respects, parent his younger brother. All of Jim's early recollections centered on being scared about "out of control" situations and feeling safe when he was "in charge." Jim's style of life convictions could be summarized by the following syllogism: I must be strong, others are not trustworthy or will let me down, the world is a scary place, therefore I must be in charge or life will get out of control and overwhelm me." As I understood it, Jim developed a dysfunctional conviction (or "basic mistake") that, in order for his life to be manageable and for him to feel a sense of safety and security, he had to be in charge and be in control of his environment at all times.

In helping Jim gain insight or better understand this core conviction about control, I might ask, "Could it be you only feel safe or comfortable when you are in control or in charge of things?" I would seek to help him understand that some of his core beliefs may have enabled him to survive when he was younger but are not working very well for him as a young adult. Useful questions here might include: "What benefits do you gain from always having to be in control? What costs do you incur?" "How have people responded to you—both at work and in dating relationships—as you have interacted with them from an 'in control' and 'in charge' perspective?" "How do you think these beliefs will impact your future career and future relationships?"

The reorientation phase of counseling usually begins when clients have some understanding of their dysfunctional convictions and are ready to take action to put their understanding to work; however, an Adlerian therapist may also use the task-oriented interventions common to the reorientation phase earlier in the process to facilitate development of insight. Jim needs to consider alternative beliefs, behaviors, and, perhaps most importantly, motivations for his actions. Merely understanding the dynamics of his behavior would not be adequate for Jim or any other client; he not only needs to consider behavior changes but implement some of them as well. Although several Adlerian interventions could be useful for Jim, I might consider asking him to use the time between sessions to “act as if” he was more like the person he wants to be, keep a journal of how he experiences the process, and discuss those experiences in subsequent sessions. Or, given his preference for structure, I might use the “Reflecting As If” (RAI) process that I developed. Using the RAI process, I would ask him to take a reflective step back before moving forward to act as if. To begin this process, I would ask him to reflect on and respond to the question: “How would you be different if you were acting as if you were the person you want to be?” We would then co-construct a list of ‘as if’ behaviors that manifest him acting as if, rank them from least difficult to most, and then select a few for the coming week. Again, I would ask him to keep a journal and discuss his experiences in subsequent sessions. As he progressed to more difficult behaviors on the list, encouragement would be crucial because success would come less easily. Encouragement here would focus on affirming his effort and incremental growth; that is, helping him value the process of moving in a positive direction rather than viewing success only in terms of reaching a desired goal.

In addition to acting as if or reflecting as if, I might encourage Jim to “catch himself” in the process of repeating behaviors he is seeking to change. For example, when he encounters a

situation in which he senses he needs to take charge—either at work or in a relationship, he can catch himself and reflect on the best course of action prior to responding. Throughout the reorientation phase, I would seek to demonstrate encouragement by having faith in Jim, seeking to engender hope for his continuing success, and affirming Jim's effort and progress rather than merely achievement of an outcome.

Follow-up: You Continue as Jim's Therapist

1. What are your impressions and reactions to Dr. Watts' work with Jim? If you could work with Jim for 8-10 sessions, what would be your focus from an Adlerian perspective?
2. To what degree might your life experiences impact your work with Jim? To what degree might you use self-disclosure with him? How will you know if what you are sharing is for his benefit and not your own? What might be some indications that you are meaningfully using yourself as a person in counseling with Jim?
3. How might you work with Jim if he started manifesting control-oriented behaviors with you in counseling sessions? Would you discuss these behaviors with Jim? Why or why not? If so, how would you address them?
4. What Adlerian techniques not mentioned in the case study do you think might be useful for working with Jim? How might they be useful?
5. From an Adlerian counseling perspective, how might you work with Jim differently than the process explained in the case study? Explain why you chose this different course of action.