

Counselling session



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Counselling a stranger can be difficult, counselling a friend is fraught with difficulties. I found this practice session particularly challenging as I asked a very old friend to play the part of the client. I understand as a result of this session why being a therapist for family and close friends is not advised. Even though I was playing the role of the counsellor, my inner self was in a constant tug-of-war between being a friend and keeping a professional step back as required by a counsellor. The session took place in the home of the client.

Her two-year-old daughter was in attendance. This made the session difficult as we were interrupted throughout. There are times in the taping of the session that required us to stop the filming as her daughter was fascinated by the camera and would walk up to it singing and laughing at herself. It was difficult to keep the session fluid as a result. My client, Janet, came to the session wishing to discuss problems she was having with her ex-husband and also the impact this was having on her three daughters.

In watching the session, there were some things I did well, others not so well and a couple I should not have. I listened actively, this led me to being able to ask appropriate questions allowing Janet to expand further. I believe that rapport was established and maintained. I employed empathy, this was a struggle. Whilst I did ask appropriate questions, there were times when instead of questioning I should have been feeding back. I interrupted Janet in parts, thereby cutting off her being able to go forward.

In suggesting to Janet “ couple / parenting counselling” I denied Janet the opportunity to set her own goal. In practice sessions throughout this module

I have when working with ‘clients’ who more acquaintances than friend I was able to effectively employ empathy, and allow them to set their own goals. Originally I was to use another person for the taping of this session; unfortunately she had a family emergency, which necessitated having Janet as my client. This I believe is the reason I inadvertently offered her a solution as a friend would.

Lewis and Graham (2006) explain that the receiver of message must not believe that active listening is easy or happens naturally; rather they come to the realisation that listening effectively and actively is hard work. Although I had been practicing active listening through this and the last module I still found it hard work throughout this session. This was partly because of the interruptions by the two year old and partly because I was trying not to allow past knowledge of the difficulties Janet has had with her ex-husband to interfere with where she was at in the session. This required conscious thought throughout.

Earlier in the session I employed non-verbal cues such as “ mm mmm” and “ uh huh” to let Janet know that I was listening to her and allowing her express what she was feeling and where she was at. I from there I was able to ask such questions as, “ How do think it might be affecting them? ” and “ What changed? ” This allowed Janet to open up further and explore the situation. Such as her personal growth since her ex-husband left her with three children under the age of seven, and the way in which she analyses everything. This became evident to me after the session when reviewing the session with Janet.

As I alluded to earlier I was aware leading into the session of some of the issues she discussed but not all. Janet commented to me afterward that some of my questions had caused her to think about things in different ways. I will explore later in this reflection where I didn't listen as actively and consequently interrupted Janet, but asking questions of her. This and offering a solution to Janet put a hitch in our rapport, which was otherwise maintained throughout. Rapport is something that I believe I build reasonably well with people, and more often than not can where problems arise in building rapport.

What is difficult on this situation is that this “ client” and I have had a 33-year friendship. According to the Australian Counselling Association's Code of Conduct (2008), registered members must not initiate, develop or pursue a relationship be it sexual or non-sexual with past or present clients, within two years of the last counselling session. This session had it been a real session as opposed to a practice session would have compromised this code. In this session I believe rapport was evident however I cannot effectively judge whether the initial rapport was not aided by our friendship.

This might further impacts on empathy. Empathetic listening and feedback allow freedom from judgement, thereby enabling the client to open up. DeVito (2009) tells us that a respectful, empathetic, genuine and caring mindset are lost if the client cannot see that reflected in their counsellors external behaviours. In matching Janet's posture, language and tone, I reflected back to Janet her external behaviours. When I commented to Janet “ and because you know that at the base of it's not you it's him” I put into my words her thoughts regarding his behaviour.

Janet's response of " well that's the thing, I don't let it affect me anymore..." allowed her to then explore why her reactions to her ex-husband had changed. I found this skill of counselling particularly difficult in this session due to our friendship. In my introduction I alluded to an internal battle, this was at the core of my internal battle. As a friend who has also gone through a separation and divorce as well as being a mum who deals daily with children suffering from a lack of contact with their father, my tendency is to sympathise with Janet.

Throughout the session I was aware of working on multi planes whilst being in the moment with Janet, I was also conscious of not appearing sympathetic rather to be empathetic. In my day job as a coordinator of a 24 hour Autism Hotline, I am often asked by parents at their lowest point " What should I do? ", " who should I see? ", and " what would you do? " My standard response is I can give several options but as everyone's life experiences and circumstances are different I cannot make the decision for.

You need to make the decision that works best for you in your situation. I find it easier to be consciously empathetic with strangers or those I do not know as well. As a friend I feel the pain more acutely. As a result I tend to offer sympathy. This happened when I failed to allow Janet to make her own decision about goal setting. When I offered the option to seek couple / parenting counselling, I took from Janet the power and ability to decision make.

At the time I said it I thought to myself " now why on earth did you say that? For me this was my heart ruling my head. A sure sign that in this instance I

failed to be empathetic in the session. Janet's reply of "oh yeah that could world but I'd have to talk him into it" was almost like a response that someone gives when offered a solution that isn't their own. In the future, whether in an actual counselling situation or a role-play, I will be more aware of that struggle and think before I speak. I also need to be aware of interrupting. A couple of times throughout the session I either interrupted Janet's story or her answers.

This was evident when I said "you're feeling like you are constantly being put at fault..." Janet uttered "uh uh", but before she could continue I interrupted and did not allow Janet the opportunity to feedback either positively or negatively. Instead I just asked another question. I further compromised this when I bombarded Janet with 3 questions straight after asking her "when he does attack you" Whilst Janet answered each of these questions I could have quite easily shut down the whole counselling session. I risked breaking rapport, empathy and Janet's chance to tell her story, thereby limiting the opportunity to effectively help.

If, as McLeod (2003) tells us that one of the aims of counselling is empowering the client, whereby we work on skills, knowledge and awareness that enable the client to take control of their own life, then by suggesting the option of couple / parent counselling I have taken from her the chance to be empowered. In working on skills, knowledge and awareness we give our clients to chance to explore strategies that could work in their lives. I took from Janet the opportunity to set her own goals and to explore the process leading to this.

The fact that in the hour after this session Janet's ex-husband rang and in the course of their discussion Janet raised to him the suggestion that they maybe see a counsellor to try and work out their differences, does not reflect I believe entirely on this session. At first her ex-husband told her there was nothing wrong it was all in her head. Shortly thereafter he rang back and agreed to see someone. Janet reports they have their first session later next week. I believe that Janet would perhaps have come to the concept of parent counselling herself.

I let the friend side of myself take over momentarily. In the future I will be more than aware of the need not to suggest or goal set for the client, it is their healing journey and not mine. Just prior to the wrapping up of the session Janet presented the possibility that she over analyses things. As time was against us I suggested that at our next session we focus on over analysing things. Ideally I should have given Janet some warning prior to this that our time was almost up, with a need to review what we had discussed and offered her an opportunity to ask questions or further clarify a point or two.

The difficulty I had with timing in this particular session was trying to gauge how much time had been taken through the interruptions. I am more aware now though that whilst I might try to keep interruptions to the session minimal there could be times when this is beyond my control and I need to be more aware of time constraints in moving toward the end of a session. Whilst the practice session I originally had lined up would have had very different outcomes, this experience has helped me to realise many things. This will in time help me to be a better counsellor to my clients.

At times in the module notes the idea that counsellors often work on many planes was mentioned, this session proved this to me. I have mentioned throughout my constant internal tug-of-war in working through empathy, rapport and actively listening. There were times I succeeded and there were times I certainly failed or struggled to use these skills. In reflecting between this session and previous practice sessions I have noted that the areas I struggled most within this session I had handled better with clients not so well known to me. I did listen actively and therefore was able to ask appropriate questions.

This was undone in other sections when I bombarded Janet with questions. I struggled most with empathy because as a friend I'm more often called on for sympathy and advice on what I've done to cope in similar situations. I found it hard to separate the role of counsellor from friend. I think though for the most part that I succeeded. As a result of 33 years of friendship rapport was easier to establish than it would otherwise potentially have been. This whole experience has left me with much to think about and dwell on in my continuing counselling journey.