
CO-COUNSELLING

versus

COUNSELLING

by
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I include a section on this topic because I have experienced some fundamental misunderstandings around what Co-Counselling is, due more to ignorance and assumptions by those who have not experienced Co-Counselling and who equate it with the more understood word counselling. The following points will I hope clarify the differences and enable Co-Counsellors to present these differences and in so doing put a clear and legitimate seal on Co-Counselling.

*N.B. I shall use the word **therapy** to cover both the notion of conventionally understood counselling and therapy. This will enable me to use the words **counsellor / counselling** when I am referring to Co-Counselling practices.*

This section does not set out to differentiate Therapy and Counselling and I fully appreciate that the use of the word Therapy to cover these two practices may not be appropriate for some.

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Ground Rules

Co-Counselling

There are a clear set of ground rules laid down that underpin all Co-Counselling sessions which create a real psychological safety for both the client and counsellor role to operate within. Co-Counsellors can choose any number of other Co-Counsellors to work with. There is also no monetary payment for the sessions, EQUAL TIME being the currency used.

Therapy

No similar set of Ground rules are discussed in therapy settings as a general rule. This is not to be confused with the contracts agreed by client and therapist prior to commencement of therapy regarding what the client wants out of the therapy, the practical business arrangements; initial number of sessions etc.. Individual therapists will also vary in the rules they set out for their clients and clearly some may coincide with those we have in Co-Counselling.

Therapists will not on professional grounds agree to seeing a client who is already being seen by another therapist. Permission from a Psychiatrist has also to be given if the client wishes to have therapy whilst under the psychiatrists care.

There is in addition always a fee paid by the client to the therapist.

Training

Co-Counselling

There are two roles taught in Co-Counselling: the client role which is the main purpose of the training and the very specific set out role of the counsellor.

Client role. The purpose of the Fundamentals training is to teach the client how to work with the counsellors interactions at every point. The techniques are quite simple and as a result are not mystifying but theoretically well understood. Because the client has learnt and experienced these as a client then they can use all the same techniques to the client when they are in the counsellor role. This according to John Rowan (1980) is the crucial point. He also makes the point that what is mystified in most other forms of therapy and may take years to discover is “that it is the client who has to do all the work” . Co-Counselling makes this clear from the beginning of the training. Another real difference that is pointed out by John Heron is that Co-Counselling is to do with an in-depth contract to do cathartic work. This requires appropriate preparation and training as client. John Heron also stresses that there needs to be a contract agreed by the client that they wish to work in this way with conscious awareness and understanding. They need to be making a choice to do it and not just have it done to them.

The Legitimacy of client Training According to John Heron (1990) we do not have any training in our culture which teaches skills leading to emotional competence. (I would go further and say that it is not even recognised in our culture that this type of education is necessary). Co-Counselling does set out to emotionally educate people who are then trained to work on their distress and suffering and take full charge of it. This also liberates them from distorting their efforts to help others from a position of distress or to use a common phrase “to stop laying ones trip on others”.

Therapy

Client role. In a therapeutic relationship the person or client is very much in the hands of the therapist and not so much in control of their own level and depth. There is also an in-built assumption by the client that they are going to an expert or professional person. The consequences of this can give rise to an unequal power relationship, with the client submitting at some level or to some degree to this higher authority. There is as a result of these factors much more scope for malpractice in such a relationship. In addition the therapist is making sense of the clients work and interpreting this according to their own particular model i.e. Gestalt, TA, Psychosynthesis etc. Therapists do not train their clients either in theory or in practical ways to work in this manner.

Co-Counselling

Counsellor role The training for the counsellor role on the Fundamentals course is quite specific with a range of clearly set out styles of interventions and these being learnt first and foremost through being the client and experiencing the effect of these interventions for oneself. You are only as good a counsellor as you are a client is the operative maxim. The role relationship is quite formal according to Rowan (1980): “The counsellor is not to pass comments or give advice, or sympathise or share experience, but to listen and offer the learned interventions which assist the client to go beyond their resistant blocks and into the discharge of deep pain”. The notion that one human being is prepared to give another time in a non-judgmental and accepting way is the underlying theme of the counsellor role. Forty hours in my opinion is more than sufficient to learn this in the practice of Co-Counselling. It is the role of the client which needs longer! Efficiency in either of these roles really only comes after the course and then only after a great deal of practice.

Therapy

Therapy Training starts from the position of learning the therapists role and may or may not require any competence in being a client. Therapists undergo up to three or more years training learning a great deal of theory about human beings and their neuroses and as a result differ quite widely depending on their training model. I have experienced quite a partisan attitude adopted by therapists to their own style/model of training. The client on the other hand, is very much in the dark on this and consequently is in a relationship where the therapist is determining the Modus operandum.

There is a questioning by therapists about the legitimacy of a course which allows the practice of counselling after only 40 hrs or so. This is to miss the real point of Co-Counselling training in that it is to do with learning how to be a client not a therapist.

Support groups

Co-Counselling

Two kinds of on-going support are afterwards available to Co-Counsellors:

- (i) in individual two way contracts.
- (ii) in workshops that are available locally, nationally and internationally.

Unlike many other short training/experiential workshops which deal with an aspect of human development and then comes to an end, Co-Counselling training is the beginning of a continuing supportive relationship with others who are doing the same.

There is no doubt in my mind that the knowledge about human psychology and the very specific ground rules and the emotional experience learned on a Co-Counselling training gives those attending an increasingly distress-free way of being with others in every day interactions and of becoming accepting of others. The skills of: Attention Switching, Validation and Goal Setting have applications

beyond the Co-Counselling contract, and can be a valuable aid to living in the real world, in an assertive and clear way

Therapy

On-going support is usually obtained only by regular Therapy with One person.

Professionalism *versus* De-professionalism

Another misunderstood area is to do with the notion of Professionalism. Co-Counselling is seen, more by virtue of its training, or rather lack of training, to be non-professional. John Heron puts forward the view that an excess of professionalism can have two results:

- (i) The professional role is used both defensively and oppressively.
- (ii) The professionals claim an excessive degree of expertise and will delegate none of it to the laity whom they officially claim to protect.

De-professionalism also means demystification of the Therapist role and thus an acknowledgement that many of its basic human skills can be acquired by many people in relatively short training programs.

These points made by John Heron are also supported by the notion in humanistic Psychology that deep down, people are OK; they are possessed of a creative and flexible human intelligence. When they are hurt (physically or emotionally) this intelligence stops functioning and feelings of distress takes place. Since the answer to all our problems lies within us, then learning how to access and identify our problems and find our own solutions seems a logical way. This is the whole essence of Co-Counselling training and as a result it is a very safe practice. Within Co-Counselling the counsellor (role) can never take a Co-Counselling client into areas they are not yet ready to look at nor to a depth they are not able to handle because the clients training teaches them how to retain full responsibility for the session. Our Psyche is after all ours, and our responsibility alone.

Finally a word about the techniques taught on a Fundamentals course. They are all drawn from a variety of Analytical and Humanistic Philosophy. Co-Counselling is therefore a mixed bag from a variety of sources. This amalgamation of techniques is its only claim to uniqueness. Co-Counselling therefore fits with most other Therapies with its culture. It is a very useful stepping off ground for those wishing to enter this field of Professionalism!

Comment

In drawing attention to the above points the reader may be forgiven for assuming that I hold a preference for Co-Counselling over therapy. This is not so. Therapy certainly does have its place and it is different to Co-Counselling. My purpose has not been to say which is better but to show these differences. Co-Counselling is for those who are able to manage their lives already but who wish to enhance their way of being in the world with themselves and others. It is for us normal neurotics! Those who are not able to manage their lives by the conventionally accepted yardsticks, paradoxically have to put themselves in the hands of others in order to get help for themselves! Therapy is still seen very much as a sick persons resort, and there is some truth in this, however by virtue of the influence from America where Therapists have done a good job in selling themselves, it is becoming more acceptable and even fashionable for normal people to have a therapist. I certainly believe that this is a healthy trend. More healthy would be an overall recognition of Co-Counselling or other self help methods and that emotional literacy is a necessity!

A final word here about some prejudice I have experienced in that some therapists have asked their clients not to either go on Co-Counselling workshops or practice Co-Counselling while in therapy with them. This encapsulates the misunderstanding, Co-Counselling is a different way of working. They are both forms of therapy but one does not in my view negate the other. It is like a tennis coach saying to a

client you mustn't ski. Both are forms of sport but they are not the same and the one need not interfere with the other, nor does one take preference over another.

Each one of us has the right to choose for ourselves whatever method(s) are the most beneficial for us. Co-Counselling or one way therapy are both legitimate and each has its own values, and each has its own limitations.

References

Heron J. "Helping the Client" Sage Publications (1990), pp 12-14 & pp 57-58

Rowan J. "Ordinary Ecstasy" Routledge Keegan & Paul (1980) pp 46-49 & pp 57-59

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