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ABSTRACT

Counseling is a professional field that requires as much or more courage than virtually any non-life-threatening occupation. In a fashion analogous to both the fire fighter or the police officer who is in direct physical danger, effective counselors must fortify themselves and prepare themselves as well as possible when they enter the unknown and unpredictable experience of each client interview. Courage for the counselor occurs along different dimensions than that needed in other "dangerous" fields of work. Counselors are challenged in emotional, psychological, and spiritual areas rather than the physical. If there is a set of fears about the counseling relationship, then there must be a corresponding set of "types of courage" that counselors need to combat these fears. Five primary categories of counselor courage include the courage to: (1) know who counselors are and what they are doing as counselors; (2) experience the lives of others; (3) implement those skills counselors have learned and practiced; (4) use those skills counselors have never learned and, perhaps never even heard about; and (5) admit that counselors do not know and trust the process of counseling. The necessary courage relates directly to the trust counselors need to place in their training, in their developed skills, and in themselves. (LLL)

The Courage to Counsel

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The Courage to Counsel

Oh, come on now! "Courage in Counseling?" Talk to the man or woman on the street, and you'll not find an immediate endorsement of the idea that counselors can or should be courageous.

> "There is nothing more safe than being a counselor. All they do is sit behind their big desks and tell people what to do."
>
> "My high school counselor, Mr. Meadow, was about the most quiet and meek guy I'll ever meet. He was afraid of his own shadow. As I think about it, those students who went to see him demonstrated more courage that he did: the rest of the kids could be brutal if they ever caught you even talking to Mr. Meadow."
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> "Courage is what motivates the fire fighter to enter a burning building to rescue a child trapped inside. Courage is the strength that allows a police officer pursue a thief fleeing a convenience store before it's clear if there is a weapon involved. Counselors? They merely sit down in an attractively decorated room with comfortable chairs and talk with relatively quiet and troubled people."

. . .

Unlike those whose comments are summarized above, we are not casual and uninformed observers of counseling. We have worked directly in this field for a combined total of nearly forty years. We have been (a) learning to become counselors, (b) counseling people, and (c) teaching and supervising others in their efforts to become counselors. We have been at our jobs long enough that we are beginning to realize that anxiety and fear about being with clients will never fade completely. If it was going to go away, it would probably have happened to one of the four of us by now. Nonetheless, particularly with a new client, we still feel sufficiently fearful that we need to be courageous to continue to do our work. We know that the fear isn't going to go away, so we expect we'll always need to work on courage.

It is our experience that counseling requires us to move outside of typical comfort zones before we can be of value to others. Counseling is a professional field that requires as much or more courage than virtually any non-life-threatening occupation. In a fashion analogous to both the fire fighter or the police officer who are in direct physical danger, effective counselors must fortify themselves and prepare themselves as well as possible when they enter the unknown and unpredictable experience of each client interview. Courage for the counselor occurs along different dimensions than that needed in other "dangerous" fields of work: we are challenged in emotional, psychological, and spiritual areas rather than physical.

If there are a set of fears about the counseling relationship, then there must be a corresponding set of "types of courage" that counselors need to combat these fears. Let us examine, in brief, the five primary categories of counselor courage.

1. **The Courage to Know Who We Are and What We're Doing as a Counselors.** Let's start with what is, for many, the largest fear of all: becoming aware of ourselves. This task is, of course, no easier for us than it is for our clients. A thorough self-exploration, as valuable as it can be, is very unsettling. Do I really want to know about my strengths, weaknesses, wants and needs? Am I ready to make whatever changes might be necessitated as a result of such an exploration? Do I have the courage to take these risks? Can I be maximally helpful as a counselor without such information?

It might be argued that a counselor can be effective in helping some clients without an on-going effort toward self-awareness, but there must be certain limitations to such a counselor's effectiveness. For example, if I have never resolved my personal grief over my mother's death, it will be impossible for me to deal effectively with my client's grief over the loss of a close relative.

The second part of this fear is acknowledging "what you are doing as a counselor." There are many paths that lead a person to become a counselor, and many of these paths are tied to the counselor's needs not to the needs of potential clients. That some of our needs are addressed by our work as counselors is a wonderful side effect of the job. Nonetheless, we continually must be alert to recognize the totally undesired possibility that our needs can surreptitiously become the primary reason for our work.

Three additional subcategories within this general area of counselor courage are listed below. Due to the limitations of this presentation, these areas are not elaborated upon here:

a. The Courage to Feel and to Address Our Own Feelings
b. The Courage to Put Our Own Needs Aside
c. The Courage to Avoid Asking Questions, Giving Suggestions, and Providing Solutions

2. **The Courage to Experience the Lives of Others.** Are other people scary? Damn right! Our closest friends, people we know and love, are often rather frightening when they talk about depression, anger, hatred, pain.

pain, incompetency, or, for that matter, any negative emotion. We know from talking about crises with friends and relatives that we often come away feeling out of control, drained, and emotionally distraught. With clients, some of whom we have just met, we must somehow endure the fear of losing emotional control of a session and persist to make contact with these individuals. We need to let them know that they are not alone.

As we think of becoming involved in experiencing the lives of our clients, we are reminded of a scene from the movie, "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." Redford and Newman are chased by a group of angry horsemen, finding themselves on the edge of a huge cliff. Below (a long way below) is a river. They look at each other, close their eyes, and jump -- screaming all the way into the river below. When we approach a client's pain and discomfort, we do not know exactly where we are headed or how deep the water is below, but if we are to be helpful, we need to make that jump and accept whatever the consequences may be. [You might, however, want to avoid the screaming.] It might also be noted briefly that if we've had the courage to address ourselves and our role as counselors, we may well have made the leap into the unknown world of the client a little easier for ourselves. This is because we may be much more likely to feel an honest respect and trust in ourselves.

The courage to experience the lives of others can additionally be illustrated by a physician's comment, summarized below:

> I don't want anything to do with a counseling or therapeutic investigation. It is just too amorphous -- no one can figure out all of the variables that influence the present behavior of anyone. It is just so complex! I cannot even comprehend what it was that motivated my husband to leave the house this morning in a foul mood. It would be incredibly frustrating for me to attempt to decide how and what led to any adult's depression, lack of social skills, lowered self-esteem, or anything. Give me a disease with diagnosable symptoms and clear treatment procedures. I'd feel totally out of control in a counseling setting!

Was the doctor saying she didn't have the courage to counsel? Not directly, but, certainly, we need not read too much into her statement to hear her message: "Counseling seems scary to me!" Well, viva individual differences! Medicine seems pretty scary to us!

As with our first category of courage, this second area also contains several subcategories that could easily be further elaborated in a longer discussion of the topic:

a. The Courage to Allow Ourselves to Enter the Unknown
b. The Courage to Approach Painful/Uncomfortable Feelings
c. The Courage to Allow Ourselves to be "Out of Control"

3. **The Courage to Implement Those Skills We Have Learned and Practiced.** In a sense this category of courage is an extension of the immediately preceding category. The skills that you have learned during your counseling training and subsequent to your training are designed to push you into experiencing the lives of your clients. When we practice skills for class, however, it is much easier to incorporate those behaviors that are expected than it will be with actual clients after graduation. Even though we intellectually know that the skills we've developed are appropriate and helpful, there are always going to be times when those same helpful skills will feel uncomfortable, awkward, and foreign.

One brief illustration may serve to make this point:

> Client: I am so upset about the lack of action here in counseling. What I need is a set of specific suggestions and steps to change. All I get from you, though, is attention to how I feel about things. I know how I feel, I want ways to change!
>
> Counselor: You are really angry at me that I haven't been able to give you the strategies and suggestions that you need to change.

This counselor's statement is consistent with the skills that are taught in basic counseling classes. The counselor's learning has reinforced the idea that clients need to explore the breadth of their concerns before it can be determined what goals and strategies may be appropriate. We know that any immediate suggestions and strategies are unlikely to be productive and successful. But, the client does not know this! What this client does know, however, is that he is very frustrated and angry. Directing attention to his anger with the counselor will allow a discussion that can enhance and clarify the relationship. The element of courage, here, is evident: the client says "Don't focus on feelings" and the counselor's chosen response is a focus on feelings. This may appear, on first reading, a minor act of courage. However, take a minute to imagine yourself in that situation, and the feelings you generate in your imagery will convince you of this counselor's "valor under fire."

This area of courage includes many subcategories, including:

a. The Courage to Be Silent
b. The Courage to Explain What Counseling Is and Isn't

c. The Courage to Allow Yourself to Empathize
d. The Courage to Confront
e. The Courage to Set Counseling Goals
f. The Courage to Implement Counseling Theories
g. The Courage to Use Your "Book Learning" with Actual Clients

4. **The Courage to Use Those Skills We Have Never Learned and, Perhaps, We've Never Even Heard About.** This type of courage could easily be subtitled "The courage to respond from our gut." We certainly first need to allow ourselves the courage to use skills we have been trained to use. If the performance of known skills is accomplished well enough, however, we actually find ourselves at a different "level" of counseling that poses additional risks and fears. If we have "done our counseling skills homework," we will really begin to understand the client in ways that we never could have otherwise. We also will begin to understand the client in ways that we don't and can't fully explain. We need to accept this cognitively nonsensical notion and allow ourselves, on occasion to act on the understandings that we cannot explain.

It does not take much in depth thinking to identify immediately what would keep us from acting on ideas, approaches, and/or understandings that even we don't comprehend: we cannot justify our actions, and we might fail miserably. The fear of making mistakes is clearly an irrational one: intellectually, all of us know that we will never achieve perfection. Despite such logic, we are all, to one extent or another, attempting to accomplish just such an impossible goal. Nonetheless, after we have practiced as counselors for a while, it becomes slightly easier to accept that we will inevitably make mistakes with clients. If we can get beyond the fear of falling on our faces, however, we can begin to use skills that we've never learned.

To the extent that it is possible, we want to become open to take risks that might lead to "disastrous" mistakes. As counselor educators and supervisors, we hear ourselves advise students to focus their attention upon the communication of their effort to understand their clients: "Particularly in early sessions, make sure that you are attending to empathy in your responding." Yet, despite this emphasis in instruction, even in early sessions, we hear myself saying all kinds of "strange and unusual" comments to clients.

For example, consider the following interchange:

Client: And I do have a lot of friends at work. We talk about just anything, and we have a good time. Also, I get a chance to see one or two of my high school girlfriends occasionally.

Courageous Counselor (Possible "strange and unusual response" Number 1): I have listened carefully to everything you've just said, and yet I seem to be primarily aware of a sensation that you are shrinking as I become larger and larger.

or

Courageous Counselor (Possible "strange and unusual response" Number 2): Just a moment ago, you briefly mentioned your dad. Could you tell me more about your father?

Are these responses representative of skills that never learned? Where do these statements come from? Aren't they awfully risky? What would another supervisor say? Couldn't this client say something similar to "What in heaven's name are you talking about?" or, maybe, "Why are you asking about my dad?"

First of all, these two statements are not examples of what every counseling statement should or could be. Empathy and communication of understanding are not to be thrown out of the counseling alliance. Nonetheless, these statements do come from somewhere. We find ourselves, even after thinking about this for several months, hesitating in writing this next sentence: these, and many similar, though non-logically related responses, come from our "inner voice," from a series of "right brained" hypotheses, or from our own "gut" reactions! And, even though, we cannot explain in logical, scientific fashion how (or, honestly, if) such hunches might be helpful, we are now becoming increasingly tolerant of the belief that such ideas are the core of our "connectedness" with the client. If we don't allow ourselves to experience the client fully and totally, we clearly will not ever experience ideas generated by "gut level" impressions.

Would we suggest to a student prior to prepracticum to pay full attention to his or her "inner voice" or "gut" reactions? Would we suggest that this student would be best led by such inner reactions? No. The counseling skills base is a crucial foundation for allowing us to attend to our inner voices. These hunches and gut reactions are not generated simply by ourselves, they are generated in the context of a mutually-shared on-going communication between two people: ourselves and our clients! Without the understanding gained within the relationship, when we listen to our inner voices, we listen only to information about ourselves not about our clients or about our relationships with our clients.

Is it courageous to pay attention to such feelings and impressions? If it is difficult for us, as behavioral scientists and researchers, even to put down such thoughts in writing, you can bet it is highly difficult to act on such "inner voices" in an actual counseling session.

Once again, further subcategories of the courage to experience clients could well be outlined and described in greater detail. These subcategories include:

a. The Courage to Listen to Our Own "Inner Voices"
b. The Courage to Take Risks
c. The Courage to Make Mistakes -- Even Big Ones (or Ones that Feel like "Big Ones")

5. **The Courage to Admit That We Don't Know and Trust the Process of Counseling.** This type of courage relates directly to one crucial and continuing aspect of counselor growth and development. We must be aware that we are always learning and that we must allow ourselves to acknowledge our continuing lack of knowledge. The "process" of counseling, however, if we can allow ourselves to stay in the counseling relationship, will help us deal effectively with whatever knowledge we don't have. The acknowledgement that we don't know must be made to ourselves, to our clients, and to our colleagues and/or supervisors. Good counselors do not have to know more, be smarter, be wiser than their clients. They merely need to be there fully to help clients self-explore and to help them generate potential ways to change. Geniuses, we're not; caring individuals, we hope we'll always be.

Three subcategories of the courage to admit what we don't know and trust the process include:

a. The Courage to be Open to Feedback and Supervision
b. The Courage to Tolerate Dissonance and Confusion
c. The Courage to Stay With the Confusion in a Series of Counseling Sessions until We get to the Clarity

Summary

Don't expect your fears and anxieties about counseling to be totally obliterated, but don't expect to ever be fully overwhelmed by them either. Your necessary courage relates directly to the trust that you need to place in your training (and, by implication, in your teachers), in your developed (and always developing) skills, and in yourself. You can never be sure that you have "covered every base" or that you can "deal with every situation." Therefore, you are always going to need courage as you continue your work as a counselor. So, take courage and stay with it! Both you and your clients will be much the better for it!