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WHEN IS COUNSELING EFFECTIVE? AS THEORY VIEWS IT

It is not more than a few decades ago that any systematic study of counseling techniques was undertaken. Within that time several significant advances have been made, two of these being the development of psychological tests and the development of the client-centered approach. There are others. The interest in counseling has gathered momentum with the passing years. Much is being written about the subject, more churches and agencies are doing more about it. The theoretical orientations disclosed in all this activity, of course, differ. But there seem to be certain principles acceptable to the majority. This article will concern itself with some of these recurring theoretical postulates.

Counseling Is Affected by the Counselor's Underlying Assumption About Personality Dynamics

Counseling can hardly be effective without a workable and valid assumption about what people are and why they do what they do.

Many counselors see their work from the adjustment point of view. Problem solutions depend on getting the counselee to change either the environment in which he lives or his pattern of reacting to the environment. If you can't pass your courses, either drop out of school or study harder. There are, of course, many shades of dogma here, but the general approach assumes a person pliable enough that he can change. His inner dynamics do not enter much into the picture. This approach, while valid and useful as far as it goes, does not account for the depth of personality. It cannot handle too satisfactorily the living, wishing, hating, fearful, driving person.

While Freud can be blamed for many things, he can also be credited for introducing the idea that man has basic needs he strives to satisfy but that in the attempt to satisfy them he often meets with heavy social and personal opposition. What he cannot express, he must repress. Submerged, unconscious repressions, however, still boil and rumble around to give him all kinds of trouble. Freud's observations open the door to more dynamic understandings for counselors.

A really fresh approach for the counselor is afforded by the later development of the client-centered school of thought, originally labeled nondirective. Carl Rogers accepted the ideas of the uncon-

scious and repression. But he, in a sense, substituted for Freud's destructive innate drives the idea that the individual has a positive force within himself that leads to growth and integration. When helped to meet and clarify his unconscious strivings, the individual has the ability to straighten himself out. Again these two views have certain validity. They are theoretical advances over the pure adjustment point of view, but, as far as the Christian is concerned, they do not yet reflect the whole story of personality nor account for everything that is true about the human being.

From experience anyone can see that life is more than releasing the inner potentialities of the individual. Life must be fitted into a complicated and exhausting scheme, a scheme which involves what is right and wrong for the personality and for the personality as it rubs against other people. As people in communion with God and alert to His revelations, assumptions about the person with whom we are working must certainly include adjustment-needs, hostile impulses, and constructive drives, but must also recognize the moral obligations, the assistance and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the end and purpose of life in God, who gave Himself for this troubled soul before us.

Counseling Is Made Effective When Helpful Precounseling Is Going On

Counseling will occur only if the person in trouble feels that he can place his confidence in someone, specifically here the pastor. Thus counseling depends on certain precounseling conditions being right. There are any number of these qualifications that will encourage people to come to a potential counselor, but the most important ones center in the kind of person the counselor is.

We might distinguish three kinds, although there are others. We might describe one group of possible counselors as persons who are playing the role of their particular office. Let's say the typical picture of the pastor is one of an authority on high in whose presence the bravest soul trembles, who preaches Law fearlessly, condemns all sin forthrightly, and brooks no foolishness. A pastor may think that's the way he ought to act. He may act that way because actually he's afraid to act any other way. To act human, as he really is, would allow the parishioners to get out of hand and would thus threaten his ego, his self-esteem. Now when a person acts out such an authoritarian role, he does not accomplish what he wants. One of two things may occur. A member may grow excessively submissive to him and dependent on him, as he would to his own father. Or he may rebel against the portrayed authority, becoming spiteful

and unco-operative. Either alternative does not promote good counseling relationships.

Sometimes a preacher feels that he has to get down to the level of his parishioners if he is to get along with them and they with him. He thinks that he can do this by being a good Joe, a don't-call-me-Rev. Thomson-just-call-me-Bill sort of preacher. The undue familiarity does not particularly help his position. In fact, people either like the level of fraternization, or they find it distasteful. In either case, when something is really on their mind, they won't be likely to come to someone with whom they have such a superficial standing or to someone with whom they feel ill at ease. This approach again stems from weakness. This pastor is again afraid of himself and his ability to win his people by a more genuine technique.

Precounseling will draw people when the man is sure of himself, when he is confident of his own position because of his ability, labor, and experience at the task. Beyond that confidence he must also have an honest sympathy and love for the parishioner as an individual. His living faith in Christ must warm his life and promise warmth to the observer. He acts out no roles, he is himself. In everything that he does and says he creates confidence.

One of the qualities that build willingness to confide is consistency. One teacher has said that the ability to remain consistent in all one's dealings with people is one vital requirement for a successful ministry. It is also as vital for successful counseling. One cannot think of a pastor as one type of person at one time and another type in another situation. It then is apparent that the person is wearing a series of masks. The individual cannot be sure which mask the potential counselor will be wearing when he approaches him.

Effective Counseling Depends on Following Certain Principles

Much of the theory written today develops procedures reflecting to considerable degree the client-centered orientation of Carl Rogers. We cannot elaborate fully, but a few examples will demonstrate the general line that this thinking follows.

Perhaps these few principles can most easily be pointed up by devising a hypothetical counseling situation, with a remark by the counselee and sample replies by counselors using one or the other unhappy and unprofitable approach.

The counselee, a student doing poorly in high school, says to his pastor: "I've worried about this so long. Now I simply have to tell someone. I'm not at all sure that I'm going to make the grade. I think that I should give up my studies."

One counselor replies: "Son, I've felt the same way many times. But you shouldn't give up. Once you've set your hand to a task, you should never turn back. Don't you know that God promises to guide you in everything? Don't let Him down." It is obvious that this moralistic approach will either cause the student to kick over the traces completely or will muffle a voice that should be heard now. The right and wrong of an action can be arrived at with much more effectiveness by the counselee himself.

Another replies to the same remarks: "Well, you've come to the right place this time. Just tell me the whole story. What's on your mind? I think that I can straighten this out for you." While overdrawn perhaps, a reply like this may lead the man to retreat into his troubled shell. Once the advice is given, he will hurriedly leave. Little or no impression has been made because he hasn't worked out the solution for himself. The course of action hasn't been really made a part of his own thinking.

A third counselor might respond: "Are you sure that you want to give up your studies?" One of the helpful suggestions that theory makes is that the counselor should reply to the meaning and feeling that the counselee expresses rather than to the intellectual content. Here the fact that he is quitting his studies is a concrete matter easy to take a hold of, but the pent-up feeling that he is now ready to vent is the more important and fruitful lead for the counselor to follow.

Another answers in this way: "I am anxious to help you." This describes the situation correctly, the counselor is truly anxious. But if he tightens up, is concerned about his ability to help and shows it, if he therefore tries to lead the discussion, he will likely wreck the counseling.

A happier reply is given by another counselor, who says simply: "You're disturbed and feel that you want to tell someone about it." The reply allows the student to go on at his own rate, in his own way, with his story as he wants to tell it. It is not coercive or moralistic. It demonstrates the counselor's interest without pressing his own role in the interview coming up. It responds to the real issue, to the meaning of the statement.

To the casual observer this method of therapy sounds very easy, and simple to the point of being ridiculous. Actually, in practice, it is not easy to reply in such a way that the counselee feels that he wants and is able to go on in unfolding this difficult, involved, and painful business. Someone who knows the rules only and hasn't mastered the

meaning of this approach might reply rather deadly, "You've really worried about this," whereas the student would reply, "Yes, I have." And there one would be stuck.

Counseling Is Effective When Insight Is Reached

Counseling, at least as it is being considered here, produces results when it leads to the abstract thing we call insight. Insight is a relatively sudden matter. It is complete when it occurs. It does not necessarily involve explanation on anyone's part of what has occurred or what should now be done. It is more emotional than intellectual. It is the light, suddenly turned on and flooding the room. Facts and emotions that previously were felt singly and in a confused way now are seen in their right relation. Everything seems to make sense.

Such insight depends in the first place on the counselee feeling some need, however vaguely. He comes a step closer to insight when the counselor is able to help him order the various unrelated bits of information and feeling pertinent to the problem. A promiscuous woman who blamed parents, husband, men in general, for her plight reached one level of insight when she finally was able to say: "I guess I've been looking for love all the time, but have been searching for it in the wrong way."

A slightly advanced step sometimes comes when the counselee admits that the fault may be his and that the responsibility for doing something about it is his. A teacher may blame lack of discipline on the character of the individual members of the class, the subject matter, and teaching aids made available to him, but finally may get on the track of correcting the situation when he says, "Maybe the trouble really begins with me."

Of course, when the cause is rooted out and the whole dynamics of the matter is laid out clearly, the final level of insight has been reached. It often is accompanied by a feeling of release, of well-being. With such insight, counseling is considered to be effective.

Conclusion

Theoretical approaches to counseling today emphasize the importance of the individual. No mechanical methods will do, no bossing by the counselor. Therapy must center in the unique individual who has the capacity, under proper counseling environment, to work through his own problem.

KENNETH H. BREIMEIER