

COUNSELLING SKILLS AND STUDIES

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COUNSELLING SKILLS AND STUDIES

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DR ANTHONY CROUCH

2ND
EDITION



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PERSON-CENTRED COUNSELLING

The person-centred view of what goes wrong is that the increasing tension between a person's organismic self and their self-concept – which has been formed from the conditions of worth imposed by others – leads to ever-increasing internal disharmony. Rogers called this tension and split between the organismic self and the self-concept 'being in a state of *incongruence*': in other words, not in harmony. The person becomes increasingly unable to trust and rely on their own internal valuing process and unable to fulfil their potential or self-actualise. Although a person-centred counsellor would not use mental health terminology like 'depression' and 'anxiety', preferring instead to use the client's own language for describing what 'ails' them, these are the kinds of problems that clients present with.



So, how does a person-centred counsellor help clients to change?



Rogers was not really interested in change for its own sake or in focusing on 'problems' alone, because he saw people as being much more than the sum of their problems and full of potential. He was interested in creating an environment where a client could realise their potential and grow as a whole person. Alongside this holistic view, Rogers firmly believed that the client was the expert on their own life, and as such rejected the use of techniques that put the therapist in the role of an expert on the client's life.



Hold on a minute: if person-centred counsellors do not use techniques and are not the expert, what do they do?



In its simplest form, Rogers believed that the relationship between client and counsellor was the key factor in how therapy works. If you remember the theory, he believed that people become distressed or 'dis-eased' because they have lost touch with their organismic self, as a result of the conditions of worth imposed on them by family and society. Rogers saw the therapist's role as offering the opposite – in other words, a relationship that was not conditional in any way. He did not want the counsellor to be yet another significant person in that client's life influencing how they should act, behave, think or be.



So what you are saying is that the counsellor should in some way be neutral?



'Neutral' is not really the right word because it sounds too detached. The person-centred relationship is more like 'unconditional love'. Rogers believed that the counsellor's role is to provide a particular kind of relationship which acts as a counterbalance to 'what went wrong', and this in turn becomes a catalyst for change. His radical proposition was that six conditions were all that were 'necessary' and 'sufficient' for change to occur, with the most important being the three *core* conditions.



So, first, we have *conditions* of worth and now we have *core conditions* – is that a coincidence?



Absolutely not. Instead of conditions being put on the client that require them to be different from who they truly are, the counsellor offers the right conditions or climate for the client to be who they truly are. Let's look at each condition and see how this works.

1. Empathy

The first core condition is empathy, which we looked at in Part I of the book. Empathy is central to person-centred counselling; the counsellor needs to be able to put themselves so much inside the private world of the client that they can clarify thoughts and feelings or hidden and denied parts of the client that they themselves are barely aware of. Another way of putting it is that the counsellor is able to feel and sense the client's world so accurately and sensitively that they can then translate that experience back to the client. As the client experiences being understood, they are able to understand themselves and get back in touch with their organismic self. The question counsellors need to ask themselves is:

Can I let myself enter the world of his feelings and personal meanings and see these as he does? Can I step into his private world so completely that I lose all desire to evaluate or judge it? (Rogers, 1990: 121)

2. Congruence

The second core condition is congruence. Rogers also used the words *genuineness* or *realness* to describe congruence. What this means is that the counsellor commits to being real in the relationship; both words are important here – 'being' and 'real'.

Rather than 'doing' something as an expert, like a doctor or a teacher, the person-centred counsellor will offer themselves as they are, not in a professional role. You could call this 'being' rather than 'doing'.



That feels confusing. What do you mean by 'being' and 'doing'?



Rather than 'doing' something with, or to, your client, such as imparting knowledge or using techniques, the person-centred counsellor meets the client as their own self. They are not putting on a façade but 'being' with the client. The client is meeting the real person.



But how is that different from meeting a friend?



It's different because in a friendship both people make demands on each other and want something from the relationship, whereas in a person-centred relationship the counsellor is real and available – but for the client, not for themselves.



I'm not sure I understand what being real might mean in the counselling relationship.



Well, let's suppose you were listening to a client and beginning to feel bored or irritated. You wouldn't just say, 'I'm feeling bored'. Instead, you listen to your feelings and notice you are feeling bored and try to find out what it might mean.



So what would you actually say to a client if you were feeling bored?



Let's imagine that the client has been going over the same ground week after week, talking about how disillusioned they are at work, and you begin to feel a sense of boredom. You would be congruent with your feeling by saying something like:

You have been talking about your disillusionment with work and I am wondering whether this feeling of boredom that I am picking up is perhaps what you are feeling too?



Oh, I see. So you kind of put the boredom into the room, so to speak.



Yes, you will notice that I used the skill of immediacy in this example, which we looked at in Part I of the book. This is the challenge of congruence – being real but for the benefit of someone else.



Why is congruence so important?



Because it is the direct opposite of the state in which clients come to counselling, i.e. in a state of incongruence. If the counsellor is congruent, it helps the client to be real too. It is a powerful message which says it's OK to be yourself and be real.

3. Unconditional positive regard

The third core condition is unconditional positive regard. The counsellor needs to display unconditionality towards the client to counteract the conditions of worth that the client has grown up with. Unconditional positive regard means fully accepting the client and their individual experience of the world.



But what if I don't agree with what the client has done or what they represent?



I think it is important to recognise that this is difficult. We don't have to approve of the behaviour, but we do need to have unconditional respect for the person and how they see the world. This is where congruence is important. To pretend to approve of something that the client stands for would be incongruent, but at the same time it is not helpful to judge the client. For example, if the client expresses racist views, we might not approve of these views but we need to explore what this means to the client. The counsellor might say something like:

I find it difficult to understand where your racism comes from and wonder what you have experienced that leads you to see things this way.



I think I understand. I have to be open to understanding where the client is coming from, even if I don't share their values.



Exactly, although this is often difficult for the counsellor. It's a bit like the kind of unconditional love you might give your children. You might not always approve of what they do or say, but you let them know this while also loving them.

As with the other main approaches, person-centred counselling has broadened and developed to include other ways of working, but the central principles remain the same.



REFLECTION

How do you feel about the person-centred way of working?

One of the criticisms of the person-centred way of working is that the core conditions are 'necessary' but not 'sufficient'. Do you think the core conditions of the therapeutic relationship would be enough to help you change?