Client exploration

Preamble

Previous chapters have made reference to the fact that different qualities of counsellor responses facilitate different degrees of client exploration. The emphasis in those chapters was on the skills of the counsellor. We now need to recognise that the outcome of the first phase of the counselling process is also a function of the willingness and the skill of clients to engage in self-exploration—an activity that it is usually simply shortened to ‘exploration’.

In this text, ‘exploration’ refers to an internal activity that is ‘client-directed’. By this we mean that clients control what they talk about. They determine whether responses made to their statements are accurate or not. In the presence of effective responses, clients gain new insights into personal aspects not previously considered. In short, as clients explore, they become more self-aware of their ‘blind spots’, and who they are. Egan describes an exploratory strategy that is ‘expert directed’. This strategy also seeks to help clients deal with their blind spots by asking a series of ‘challenging’ questions (Egan 1998, pp. 146–200). In many ways Egan’s strategy serves a similar purpose to the personalising process that is yet to be discussed. In our view Egan’s approach is less preferred because expert directed activities tend to predetermine the areas to be explored. In our experience clients access, ‘own’, and deal with their blind spots more effectively when personal relevance emerges under the client’s own control.

This chapter: (1) offers an opportunity for readers to undertake a simple review of their current ability to self-explore; (2) describes the nature and function of exploration; (3) describes discernable levels of exploration; (4) discusses how people learn, and use, the skills of exploration; (5) reviews some research that shows the relationship between different levels of ‘helping’, and different levels of ‘helpee’ exploration; (6) provides a written discrimination test.

Reviewing current competence

One’s competence at self-exploration is reflected in one’s level of self-awareness. We are not talking here about the numerous questionnaires and psychological tests that can add to our self-awareness. Here, we are simply concerned with how skilfully we ‘enlighten’ ourselves about ourselves as our lives unfold through time. A simple way to assess this
Client statement 9
'I went to the doctor and she said I needed help. I could have told her that! Doctors are useless, they tell you the obvious, and shut you up with a prescription. There ought to be better selection criteria for doctors. Some might know their stuff but they can’t relate as human beings.'

Level of exploration:
Reasons

Client statement 10
'Hmm, I am starting to feel a great sadness as we talk. It really hurts. It has been so long since I have felt such deep emotion. I guess I have kept it all in for years. It scares me'.

Level of exploration:
Reasons:

The ratings for Exercise 10 are on page 500.

Summary

What exploring is
Exploring is a personal, individual review and extension of thoughts, feelings and ideas.

What exploring does
Effective exploring:

• provides opportunity to review where one stands in relation to an issue;
• progressively integrates the emotional and the rational;
• assists the consideration of aspects not previously addressed;
• links seemingly unrelated elements in ways that makes increasing sense;
• raises consciousness and understanding of the self.

Why exploring is important
If one is able to explore all aspects of a situation, then one is able to understand more fully and clearly so that one feels more ‘whole’, and aware of one’s relationship to significant others, things and events.

When exploration is used
Exploration is used:

• whenever one experiences uncertainty or disarray;
• after any action—so that one can ascribe its meaning.

How to explore
The skill steps which lead to effective exploration are:
• attend, observe, listen and respond to oneself, or (if this is not possible for any reason);
• seek out a trusted person who is more functional than oneself, in the moment, and have them attend, observe, listen and respond to you.

References


