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Abstract

The first time I encountered the concept of “sitting with the pain” was in supervision, some eight years ago when I was doing an internship in counselling psychology. This was following a particularly difficult session with a client, who was clinically depressed and was desperately trying to process her feelings of grief and loss. As I sat with her in the session, an intense feeling of helplessness took over me and I fought hard to resist the urge to provide her with a solution and a “quick-fix”. Later in supervision, as I related what happened, I realized that I was actually afraid to confront my own anxiety in the session, and to confront my own assumptions about what my role as a therapist is. As I delved deeper into my own fears, I realized that I was afraid to confront the reality, the fact that I could not “save” my clients, that I could not take away their pain and that I could not do their work for them.

A Transparent Look at a Counsellor's Inner World: Learning to Self-differentiate and Hold the Client's Pain

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The first time I encountered the concept of “sitting with the pain” was in supervision, some eight years ago when I was doing an internship in counselling psychology. This was following a particularly difficult session with a client, who was clinically depressed and was desperately trying to process her feelings of grief and loss. As I sat with her in the session, an intense feeling of helplessness took over me and I fought hard to resist the urge to provide her with a solution and a “quick-fix”. Later in supervision, as I related what happened, I realized that I was actually afraid to confront my own anxiety in the session, and to confront my own assumptions about what my role as a therapist is. As I delved deeper into my own fears, I realized that I was afraid to confront the reality, the fact that I could not “save” my clients, that I could not take away their pain and that I could not do their work for them.

This was a turning point for me, as I gradually learned to question what I was doing: During my counselling work, I tend to prepare for a session by formulating a number of hypotheses to follow-up on, reading numerous books, and providing a lot of psycho-education and process comments during the session. However, as I later realized, this meant that I was actually “doing the work” for my clients and unintentionally taking away from them the opportunity to learn on their own and find their own answers. Thus, I realized that I needed to find a balance between providing relief from pain to my clients while at the same time giving them the space to struggle on their own.

The concept of struggling with distress is strongly emphasized by Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998, 2001). According to their model, growth can only occur out of the struggle as individuals try to survive in the midst of the destruction of their fundamental assumptions about the world (1998) and as they gradually come to acknowledge each of the positive and negative aspects of their experience (1998; 2001). Throughout subsequent sessions during my counselling internship, I found that encouraging my client to sit with her pain and experience it rather than try to repress it proved to be fruitful as she gradually got in touch with some of her deeply grounded painful feelings. This gave her the opportunity to process these and gradually grow from this experience.

A few months down the track, another client sought my assistance in reaching a decision by choosing one of two alternatives in his current marriage. He was feeling highly anxious and expected to get a clear-cut answer about what decision to make. This was a good opportunity for me to practice the skill of learning to sit with the pain and holding my client while he was struggling with his conflicting feelings. I noticed that with this particular client, I had to make the therapeutic process that was happening in the here-and-now clear. Thus, I demystified his view of the therapist as a guru who has all the answers and instead gently encouraged him to find his own answer by encouraging his to re-question some of his basic assumptions: he explored his views about relationships, what they meant to him, what his expectations and unspoken assumptions were, how he acquired these views, and whether these may have been influenced by previous models he was exposed to, such as his parents' relationship.

Thus the aim was to shift the focus away from the content and details of his current marriage, and direct it towards the underlying meaning he attributed to his marriage, and the needs that it was fulfilling.

Shifting the focus away from my client's content was a particularly challenging job as I was often pulled in to take sides. Thus I had to consciously step out of the content, and consider the process. This allowed me to avoid becoming gridlocked into my client's own dilemma, and to encourage him to do the same by considering the underlying patterns and the basic unmet needs that he was trying to fulfil.

The essential message in my work with this client was that he had the inherent ability to find his own answer and that even though he had momentarily lost his way because of his current stress; he was still his own best expert. Thus rather than attempt to give him the answer, my role was to provide him with a safe, accepting environment and to coach him to reconnect with his underlying strength and ultimately grow.

This idea is largely based on Rogers' (1961) person-centred humanistic therapy. It is based on an unconditional, non-judgmental positive regard to the client's feelings and actions, which is believed to provide the space for clients to ultimately access their innate tendencies towards growth. Thus the basic element is the inherent belief in clients' ability to find their own answers within the context of a safe, accepting environment.

Later as I started counselling couples, the concept of sitting with the pain and allowing clients to find their own answer through their struggle with distress became harder to implement. I had to learn to sit with the couple's pain and model to them the way to contain each other's pain. I also worked hard to show them that the problem does not lie in one partner or the other, and that therapy is not about "fixing" the flawed partner. Rather it is about viewing both partners as part of a system and identifying the unhelpful pattern of interaction in which they have become stuck (Gottman, 1999).

Through supervision I learned about the concept of self-differentiation, a concept that proved very useful in my work. Self-differentiation involves balancing the drive for individuality and the drive for togetherness (Schnarch, 1997). It refers to the ability to remain emotionally connected to significant others even when anxiety intensifies in the relationship, and to preserve one's sense of self, beliefs, values, and principles even if these run counter to others' expectations, wishes, or needs. This can be achieved by maintaining the focus on one's self rather than focusing and reacting to others' responses and actions. The aim is to define a responsible position in the relationship based on one's values and beliefs rather than attempt to be responsible for the significant other (Lerner, 1989). In other words, the aim is to hold onto one's self rather than hold onto one's partner (Schnarch, 1997).

Thus, I had to model to my clients the ability to sit and empathize with their distressed partner's pain while holding on to my sense of self and refraining from taking responsibility for the distressed partner's feelings. As I soon discovered, this was not an easy task. I realized that the concept of differentiation was not only relevant to my clients, but was also relevant to my work as a therapist. I realized that I too needed to differentiate from my clients and to move against my wish to fix things and rescue others in order to ultimately provide them with the opportunity to struggle with their own problems. This is particularly important because

there is a risk that I might be inadvertently contributing to my clients' gridlock and to their propensity to under-function whenever I over-function for them. Lerner (1989) referred to this pattern as the "overfunctioning"- "underfunctioning" pattern in a relationship system whereby a person's overfunctioning brings about the other's underfunctioning.

In other words, by taking responsibility for my clients' feelings and lessening their pain, I was unintentionally depriving them of the chance to struggle with their pain and realise their own competence. The more I did that, the less chance they had to be confronted with their distress. As much as I had to coach my clients to learn to differentiate, I also had to learn to differentiate from my clients. I had to refrain from reducing my clients' anxiety and just hold their pain, connect with them, and be fully present in the here-and-now of the session.

Self-differentiation is a difficult concept to explain and to apply. It is likely to be met with resistance particularly given clients' tendency to look for clear-cut, concrete answers. It demands a strong therapeutic alliance and patience as it requires convincing clients of the benefit of change even though it may be difficult and painful. It is also difficult to apply given that it demands simultaneous processing at different levels including the content of the client's accounts, the process and underlying patterns in the session, as well as the process of one's own reactions, and responses. However, with consistent work, a therapist will ultimately be able to hold on to the sense of self and resist the urge to rescue clients by prematurely reducing their anxiety while still remaining connected with them. The ultimate outcome is richer relationships, a strong sense of self, and more insightful therapeutic work.

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