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Chapter 10 - WAITING FOR THE REAL PROBLEM

People often hesitate to divulge their basic problems when they first talk to a counselor. They may begin with one thing, when actually they came to talk about something quite different. The wise counselor is conscious of this tendency and is willing to wait for the real problem to rise to the surface.

It is unwise for any counselor to “jump at conclusions.” For example, a husband and wife went to see a marriage counselor. During the initial visit the couple discussed many things including several mutual grievances. The counselor quickly “sized up” the situation. He discussed it with them, then made several definite suggestions. At the close of the session the counselor suggested that they would not need to return.

“But,” said the wife to a friend several weeks later, “we never even discussed our problem! I suppose we hated to reveal it, especially to a stranger, so we never got around to it. And the counselor, to this day, doesn’t know what our real difficulty is.”

This hesitancy to reveal true problems is also noticed by physicians, psychiatrists, attorneys and other professional people who counsel.

Why do people often start with a question or with “talk” which is not actually their real problem? Why do they seemingly dodge the issue when they have come to the counselor for help? There are many reasons. One is that they may feel ill at ease: they may not know just how to begin. To them, one way to get the conversation started is to talk about something else, something that they can discuss easily. Then a little later they will feel more secure about moving into their true problem.

Some people do not begin talking about their real concern until they have worked through one or two counseling sessions. This may be due to the fact that they do not know what their problem actually is. People with severe difficulties are often confused. They have little objective insight and they may be quite bewildered. This is part of being heavily problem laden. If a person were not confused and bewildered, if he did have insight into his own difficulty, he probably would not be entangled in it. He does know the symptoms: headaches, indigestion, resentment toward the spouse or other complaints, but he may not know the deeper problem.

Counselor was talking with Miss Deck who was disturbed about not being able to get a credential to teach in the public schools. During the first session she talked constantly about the fact that she had worked hard to get her college education and now that she had it, the State Department of Education refused to grant her a credential. As the counselor listened, he sensed that this was not her primary conflict. He realized that undoubtedly there was an underlying cause of which she was unaware. During the second session, however, she began to gain insight into the fact that her problem was deeper than not being able to obtain a license to teach. Her greatest difficulty was a serious personality problem. This was the thing that stood in the way of her credential.

Like Miss Deck, many counselees cannot put their finger on the real problem. It may require several visits before they can completely grasp and pinpoint it. This requires skill on the counselor’s part. Realizing that the counselee may be confused and upset, the counselor should create an environment in which the real problem and its causes can be uncovered.
Another reason why people may not hand their problems to you when they first begin counseling sessions is that they may be unsure whether you are competent to handle their particular difficulty. People sometimes think that their troubles are so great and over-powering that only someone who has had years of psychiatric or psychological training can possibly help them. When such a person talks with a minister or some other Christian leader, he may circumvent his real concern until the second or third session. It may take time for him to recognize the counselor’s ability.

Another reason why people do not talk about their basic problem the first time they come to you is because they may find it too painful to discuss. A serious difficulty is usually several years in the making. It has become deeply imbedded in one’s pattern of life. To get to that problem immediately and start probing around it, may be extremely unpleasant. So when mistakes, sin and shame are discussed, a person wants to feel at least a measure of ease and security in doing so.

This means that you may have to wait until near the end of the first session or even the second or third before the counselee is willing to go into the embarrassing or shameful aspects of his problem. People do not like to incriminate themselves. Realizing this, a wise counselor will refrain from “pumping.” The counselee will start talking about these things when he feels comfortable enough to do so.

At a Bible conference one summer a tall young man named Tom walked up to the senior counselor and asked if he might talk with him privately. They arranged a time to meet together. As they sat down to talk, Tom said, “You know, my problem is about my mother and dad. They don’t get along well together. While I am away at college, I keep worrying about the folks fighting at home.”

He continued at length talking about his parents. But the seasoned counselor had talked with other young men like Tom and he began to wonder if this was the boy’s problem at all. Tom did not seem deeply concerned. In fact, he talked quite glibly about the conflicts at home. It seemed to the counselor that Tom was not deeply involved in his parents’ difficulty. But he listened patiently and encouraged him to talk. After about forty minutes, Tom said, “I also have another problem.”

“Another problem?” the counselor asked.

“Yes.”

“Would you like to discuss it?”

“It’s about my girl friend.” Tom’s face turned red; he struggled in speech. Then he said, “We were at Central Park the other night. Oh, it was a terrible thing.” Then putting his face in his hands he continued, “I never thought I would do it—but now my life is ruined.”

The counselor thought, “This is the problem.” And, of course, within a few minutes he knew it was. This was Tom’s real concern. But at first it was too distressing to talk about.

Some people conceal their real problem the first few sessions because they want to be certain that the counselor is confidential. Take, for example, the experience of Pastor Norton. A young lady in his church was having serious marital problems. Eventually she sought out her pastor. During the initial counseling session, she kept repeating nervously, “Of course, this is highly confidential.”
What did this indicate? It signaled the fact that she did not yet rely on her pastor as a confidential counselor. And this was natural. However, as the session went along, Pastor Norton noticed that she made the statement less and less. He was careful not to probe too deeply and was cautious about mentioning other people. He wanted her to feel that he could be trusted with personal information. During succeeding visits the young lady was assured that her pastor would keep her confidences as a sacred trust. When she was convinced that he would not divulge personal information, she discontinued saying, “Of course, this is confidential.”

When counseling, do not be offended if a client questions your ability to safeguard confidences. Merely work with the person until he arrives at his own conclusion that you are a person of integrity—one who is highly confidential and can be trusted with any kind of information.

Another reason why people may not present their major problems at first is because they may not be sure of your attitude. Sometimes a counselee circumvents the real issue with inconsequential chatter until he learns the counselor’s general attitude and point of view. A person will not confide in another if he feels that he will be condemned. He is seeking guidance, not disapproval.

When he finds that you accept him, he will reveal his true difficulty. An effective counselor is always sensitive to the significance of an individual problem. He is aware that people may start with anything. He knows that he must not judge, but listen patiently.

He continually asks himself, “Is this really the major problem?” Then he does not rush the issue or take an early detour. This is basic to sound, professional counseling.
Chapter 11- RECOGNIZING THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

For months Mrs. Dunn had wanted to talk with her pastor about a personal problem. Finally she summoned up enough courage to call him and make an appointment. It was three o’clock one afternoon when she walked into his office.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Dunn,” the pastor said. “I’m so glad you have come. Won’t you please be seated?”

Mrs. Dunn had many things on her mind, including the fear of revealing some facts that she had quietly hidden for years. The pastor had several things on his mind, too. But uppermost was the thought that he needed to leave the city by four o’clock. He knew that if Mrs. Dunn did not “move pretty fast,” he could not possibly make it.

During the interview he kept thinking, “Why doesn’t she come to the point? If she has something to say, why doesn’t she say it?” So as they talked, the pastor kept pushing. And before the hour ended he had “yanked” considerable information out of Mrs. Dunn.

Why do some counselors “yank” information out of counselees? There are several reasons.

Sometimes, like Mrs. Dunn’s pastor, they are under the pressure of time. On the other hand, some are unwholesomely interested in other people’s private lives. Still others unwittingly press for information without realizing that they are endangering their client-counselor relationship. And there are some counselors who feel that a quick and complete emptying of sinful facts helps the counselee to get them out in the open where he can ask forgiveness.

But “yanking” is usually dangerous and unwise. If a counselor is to be his best he must let information and thoughts emerge.

Extracting information hurts. It not only hurts the one with whom you are counseling; it also damages your relationship to him. Have you ever had a tooth pulled before the anesthetic took effect? Then you know that just as a tooth must be prepared before an extraction, so a person must be emotionally ready before he yields certain information. An effective counselor is always sensitive to readiness.

There is a comfortable sequence in counseling that differs with each individual. Hurrying information out of people destroys the therapeutic process which is so vital in helping them gain insights.

After the counselee has taken the first step in seeking help with a problem, the next step is to feel comfortable about discussing it. But in this desirable therapeutic process he does not talk about just any part of the problem. He selects, session by session, those segments which are easiest for him to think about and discuss. He may not realize it, but he does not want the counselor to disrupt the succession which he chooses for revealing information. In fact, he may not know what he is going to reveal, but during the session various aspects of his problem emerge naturally. Each aspect comes at the right time for him.

The counselor realizes that by remaining a catalytic or a “furtherance” agent, he allows this process to evidence itself. At this point the counselor may actually do harm by pulling out or insisting upon certain information and insights which are not timed to the counselee’s own
readiness. The counselor does not know what the order of the process should be. Neither can he know beforehand because it differs from person to person. However, he should be sensitive to the process which is taking place and not disorder it by pulling certain information or forcing insights ahead of their natural emergence. If he does disorder the arrangement, the counselee will, possibly unconsciously, resent it and feel frustrated.

This natural “coming out” or presentation of the problem relieves the counselee from the tension of self consciousness. It also enables him to feel at ease about hearing himself say what he does. He is not fearful of what he has said; neither does he regret having verbalized it, because it came without force or coercion.

The next logical step in the therapeutic process is the counselee’s desire to carefully think and talk through each part of the material he has presented. He senses that merely “saying” it is not enough. It must be handled and examined if it is to result in clearer understanding and eventual effectiveness. The impulses which bind him must be loosened a strand at a time, and each one requires its own scrutiny and disposal. So he discusses each point in detail.

As the counselee comes face to face with each force that has combined to make him feel and act as he does, he begins to entertain, at least verbally, new ways of reacting to old problems. He thinks of ways to overcome his problems. He rationalizes new steps to take. But his willingness to do this depends largely upon the counselor’s skill in aiding, rather than disrupting the natural therapeutic process. If things have been upset and tangled, the counselee will find it difficult to think of or earnestly follow a reasonable program of rehabilitation.

Many people coming to a counselor are readily advised what to do in order to improve. But the counselee finds it difficult to follow something for which he is not prepared. If, on the other hand, the counselor carefully leads the counselee to the place where, in his own readiness, he can see likely solutions, he will be more apt to accept and begin following them.

For example, Les, a married man, took his in-law problem to a Christian leader. The leader soon saw the picture, and he could have advised Les what to do but he knew that the man would not, at present be able to follow his advice. So he waited. In the sessions that followed, Les gained many insights. Through detailed discussion he eventually uncovered the sources of his problem.

Without any pressure from the counselor, he slowly traced each cause to its present result. In time he began to see some possible alternatives for improving his in-law situation. This was followed by thoroughly discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. Finally he reached the point where he felt justified in taking a course of action. And he did so, successfully.

Les’s counselor was indeed wise not to jump ahead in the counseling sessions and destroy the natural sequence of events. Skillfully he had let the process take its own natural course. It is not difficult to get a person to open the flood gates of emotion and tell all. But unless such catharsis is desired by the counselee, he may later resent it and wish that he had not told so much.

In other words, you can win the counseling session while you are with the counselee, yet lose it as he leaves your office and thinks about it on his way home.

A counselor may help a counselee discover and follow his own unique pattern by observing the following:

- Provide a place and atmosphere conducive to uninterrupted discussion.
• Encourage the counselee to talk and express himself freely.
• Reflect and restate what the counselee says, thereby encouraging him to clarify his own thoughts and to say more.
• Do not register surprise at any information which the counselee reveals.
• Refrain from censoring or judging what the counselee says.
• Encourage the counselee to suggest and discuss his own possible solutions.
• Maintain a confidential attitude toward all discussion.

So whether you are sitting in the chair of a professional counselor or discussing a problem with a buddy at the office, or just talking over a cup of coffee with your best friend, keep asking yourself, “Am I ‘yanking’ information out of this person?” This caution pays off in big dividends.

It is a vital concept that Christian counselors cannot afford to overlook.
Chapter 12 - THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PAUSES

Through the centuries wise men have been telling us the value of silence. An old German proverb says, “The art of silence is as great as that of speech.” It was Thomas Carlyle who said, “Silence is more eloquent than words.” Another ancient proverb states that “speech is silver; silence is golden.”

These are especially true in counseling. A vital part of counseling is the pauses — the quiet moments when both the counselor and the counselee remain silent. These silences are not only golden, they are moments that pay off in excellent results. Unfortunately some people seem to think of counseling as a talking contest. They feel that every moment must be packed with words. They measure their effectiveness by the amount of talk. But this is the badge of an amateur or a poor counselor.

A guidance professor, holding a professional seminar in counseling, kept emphasizing the value of pauses. “When your client comes to a pause,” the teacher asserted, “don’t begin talking yourself. Just quietly let him think. Thirty seconds is not too long to wait.

This point hit home to one young counselor in the group. I will try out the professor’s idea and see how it works, he thought. So the next time the young man was in a counseling situation he watched for a pause. And it didn’t take long to find one. He was counseling with a fellow named Jim who had been talking considerably. Then Jim stopped. He just sat there, staring across the room. The counselor thought to himself, Here is my chance to test the professor’s “thirty second” theory.

Finally he looked at his watch again. Twenty seconds had slowly ticked by — but it had seemed like an eternity. The counselor felt as though he would explode if someone didn’t say something soon. But he was determined to sit it out for thirty seconds. And he did. Finally Jim looked up and said, “Do you know what?”

“Yes?” asked the relieved counselor.

“I was just thinking,” said Jim. “I was just thinking about something that happened when I was a kid. I guess I wasn’t more than about five years old. I think I was in kindergarten.” For some time Jim talked about the experience. Then he brought up the fact that he had faced several similar experiences both at home and at school. He continued to look back into his childhood, picking up hidden threads from the time he was a toddler to an adult.

The counselor quietly let him talk — and think.

What had taken place? This: Jim had begun to unearth some of the persisting experiences of his life, then link them to the way in which he felt and acted today.

As Jim left the office, he turned to the counselor and said, “Thanks so much for the wonderful session. You know, I think you have helped me more this time than all of the other sessions combined.”
The counselor smiled to himself and thought, “And I said less than ever!” Actually it was the series of long pauses that helped Jim so much. These quiet times had given him the opportunity to delve into his problems and come up with important insights.

Most skilled counselors do their finest work when they lead the counselee to a point where he can start thinking and talking; where he can see the relationship between his past experiences and his present feelings. The insights gained in this setting usually have lasting value since they have been uncovered by the counselee himself. Because he has thought of them, he is more willing to accept them.

The counseling session is a good place to produce thought. In fact, some people have little opportunity to think. Not at home, in the office, on the job, nor at school. The world is a place of constant hustle and bustle. When people are not frantically rushing from one activity to another, the television is glaring, the radio blaring, or the phone may be ringing. Time for quiet thought and meditation is pushed aside. But things crowding in are not the only deterrent to sound, logical thought. The people about us are often the greatest hindrance. Our friends, our family, our neighbors are eager to tell us what they think we should do. Talk is fluid and advice is free. Other people do the talking — and prevent us from thinking.

Thinking helps a person climb to a new perspective. It clears the air. It helps him see the causes of his problem and what he can do to change the situation. In fact, unless a counselor fully understands the value of pauses, he will never be at his best. Sir Isaac Newton, the great English mathematician and scientist, said, ‘What I have done is due to patient thought.’

Indeed, pauses, quiet times of patient thought and reflection, are not mere empty, vacant spaces, awkward and hard to endure. Rather, they are the golden moments when a counselee gains insights and when a counselor is working at his professional best!
Chapter 13 - PROBLEMS AND THEIR SETTING

A problem seldom stands alone. It is surrounded by a setting. It may include people, financial concerns, strong feelings, and other contributing factors. These tie-ins are like tributaries that feed into a river.

Unfortunately, the tributaries in a problem are not always obvious. That is why the counselor encourages the counselee to explore the context of his situation. Eliminating its tributaries may reduce a great river to a mere trickle. So it is in counseling. By properly dealing with the setting, one may erase the problem itself. Like explorers, the counselor and counselee search together for the sources of confusion and distress.

As they move forward, they will come to tributaries emptying into the main stream. The counselee should explore each one. The wise counselor encourages him in this because this process leads to insights and eventually to new attitudes. Unfortunately, a counselee is often hurried on to what the counselor thinks is the cause. In so doing they may both bypass the real source.

When we look closely at the setting of a problem, there are usually several people involved. Take the case of Fred and Sandra, a young married couple. For them life was a series of arguments. It had reached the point where Fred had begun to stay late at the office and go other places to avoid coming home. Sandra was considering separation. Finally Fred went to his pastor who realized it would take time to resolve Fred’s difficulty. During the first few sessions Fred told about his many arguments with Sandra: money, sex, and disciplining the children. But it was not until the third interview that Fred first mentioned his mother-in-law.

“Your mother-in-law lives with you, doesn’t she?” the pastor asked.

“Yes,” Fred replied, “she’s been with us for several years.

Fred began to discuss his mother-in-law’s role in their home. As he did, he could see that her subtle influence was a primary factor in their marriage difficulty. As Fred talked the problem through, he saw that she was “sweetly and inoffensively” controlling their home. Sandra was so accustomed to being quietly dominated by her mother that she gave more heed to her than to Fred. Not fully realizing the dynamics of the situation, and not being able to put his finger on anything his mother-in-law had actually said or done, Fred had turned his hostility toward Sandra.

She was more outspoken, usually echoing her mother’s ideas. Sandra unconsciously resented the fact that Fred did not take a stand against her mother and become the head of the house. But Fred, himself accustomed in childhood to mother domination, seemed unable to assume the role Sandra desired for him.

The insight he gained from the counseling sessions with his pastor enabled Fred to have several frank talks with Sandra about her mother. Not long after, the couple had several sessions together with the pastor. In time they made real progress toward the solution of their problem.

Sometimes the focal person in a family problem is a child. Dick and Helen, for example, could not agree on the discipline of their son, Ricky.

“All you do is baby him,” Dick accused.
“No, I don’t,” Helen retorted. “You just don’t understand him.”

On and on they went, arguing with each other until the situation was almost unbearable. Both agreed that the boy certainly had a severe behavior problem — but they blamed each other for it. Finally the couple sought the help of a Christian psychologist. Dick complained that Helen was hard to get along with. She claimed that all he did was argue. However, the psychologist was not misled by these superficial complaints. As he worked with them individually he encouraged each to explore the context of his problem. Then Ricky was brought into the picture.

As the sessions progressed the counselor arranged to see the boy alone. During the second interview with him the psychologist administered an individual intelligence test. The results confirmed the psychologist’s suspicions. They showed that Ricky had below average intelligence.

Although he was a good-looking child and clever in some ways, he could not understand and grasp ideas as rapidly as others his age. The psychologist spent two sessions with the parents tactfully explaining the boy’s problem. The parents were encouraged to cooperate with the maturity found in their child. Gradually they came to accept his retardation and made every effort to bring about a good adjustment. As they began to understand their son’s situation, they ceased blaming each other. Naturally, this paid off in better home relationships.

This good adjustment came about as the result of wise counseling. The psychologist realized that problems do not exist outside of a context — that they are nearly always influenced by other things or people. He searched for the setting, and in so doing, he uncovered the real problem.

Another tributary to the main stream of a problem is a person’s environmental limitations. Such was Dave’s case. He had been suffering from nervous tension and had seen his family physician several times for minor physical complaints. The doctor suspected that these were of psychological origin, so he referred Dave to a Christian psychiatrist.

After several interviews the psychiatrist saw this picture:

Dave had exceptional intelligence and high aspirations. But each day found him drudgingly selling bolts, nuts and screws in a hardware store. Dave had married at nineteen and had taken this job to support his wife. In time two children were born. Even though Dave was dissatisfied with his work, he dared not take the risk of changing jobs because of his family responsibilities. College and graduate study? They were out of the question. But the unresolved conflict hammered relentlessly. This intense frustration was the main cause of his nervous tension.

Gradually, Dave began to see the relationship between his “nerves” and the fact that he was a vocational misfit. He saw that he would have to set new goals in the light of reality. The counselor helped him to understand the important and unique contribution he could make to his wife and two wonderful children. He was also encouraged to serve the Lord by teaching a Sunday school class. In addition he arranged to take an evening course to qualify him for a job which would offer more challenge.

Through counseling sessions and wise planning Dave’s health improved. In time his nervous tension and physical complaints disappeared.

Another factor that contributes to people’s problems concerns their personal limitations. Marjorie, for example, was a college sophomore and had studied piano for years. Her dream was to be a
concert pianist like her Aunt Celia. She drove herself harder and harder until she neared the breaking point.

One day Mrs. Wilson, the church organist, casually asked Marjorie about her music study. After talking awhile, Marjorie burst into tears. Mrs. Wilson then encouraged the girl to tell what was troubling her. Marjorie talked about her disappointment in music. During the past two years she seemed to have been standing still, although she had faithfully practiced several hours a day. She had forced herself to practice longer, but to no avail. “Why can’t I do better?” she asked. “I hate myself for being so stupid.”

Mrs. Wilson had several talks with Marjorie. Soon the girl began to see that it was not her aunt who had really encouraged her to be a concert pianist. Rather, it was her mother. Gradually, the picture came into sharper focus. Marjorie’s mother had always envied her own talented younger sister, Celia. Therefore, her mother determined that Marjorie should excel in music. Unconsciously she thought, “Marjorie will fulfill my dreams.”

As Marjorie talked and reasoned, one question began to demand an honest answer: “Am I trying to be an outstanding pianist when I actually have only average ability?” This was the fear that had been pounding at the door of her mind. Now, with the help of Mrs. Wilson, she had the courage to open the door and face this possibility. This was the key to her problem. In a later talk with Mrs. Wilson, Marjorie decided to continue her musical training only as an avocation.

She joined the church choir and began playing for the primary department in Sunday school. For the first time she discovered the joy of using the talent she had to serve the Lord. Now music became fun.

As in the case of Marjorie, or Dave, or Fred and Sandra, each counselor should ask himself:

- What is the context of this problem?
- Who are the persons involved?
- Which environmental factors are contributing to the difficulty?
- What other conditions are impinging upon the situation?

Every problem has its setting. Often this setting is the key that opens the door to effective solutions.
Chapter 14 - TRACING THE ORIGINS

Mrs. Chambers, Christian Education Director, was just opening her office Monday morning when the phone began to ring. She lifted the receiver and found that it was one of the ladies of the church.

“Mrs. Chambers,” she said, “I wonder if I could come over and talk with you about a problem. I hate to take your time, but it’s got me worried. It’s — well, it’s very serious.”

“I’d be very happy to talk with you, Mrs. Aldrich. When would it be convenient for you to come?”

“Any time before three-thirty. That’s when the children get home from school.”

“How would one o’clock be?”

“That would be just fine. I’ll be over at one; and thank you so much. You don’t know how much I appreciate this.”

That afternoon Mrs. Aldrich revealed her problem — a marriage difficulty which she felt started “several months ago.

Mrs. Chambers thought to herself, “Several months ago? No, it probably started several years ago.

Being an experienced counselor, Mrs. Chambers knew that serious problems, like mature trees, have long, persistent roots. In fact, the root systems may be much larger than the branches above ground. The extensive roots of problems often wind their ways back into early childhood. In Mrs. Aldrich’s case, the problem which she thought started “several months ago” was actually the result of misinterpretations and fears of years past. Now they were rearing their ugly heads and interfering with her marriage. With weeks of careful counseling, however, she gained understanding and reached solutions to her problem.

Pulling up a weed without removing its taproot gives no guarantee that you have eliminated it. Just so, erasing the symptoms of a problem without dealing with its source may not prevent its reappearance in another guise.

Take the case of “Ole” (as his friends called him). He had been with the firm fourteen years. He was a quiet, likeable man and nobody wanted to see him get into trouble. So his fellow workers covered up the fact that he had recently been coming to work drunk. But one morning as he was getting on the elevator, Ole staggered right into Mr. Hendricks, the personnel manager.

Fortunately, the personnel manager was a well trained industrial psychologist. He suggested that Ole come to his office the following day after lunch.

Mr. Hendricks knew that alcoholism did not develop overnight; that it was usually a symptom of an emotional, physical, mental or spiritual problem whose roots may reach far into the past. So as he interviewed Ole he was on the lookout for three main types of information: (1) other
symptoms (in addition to excessive drinking), (2) the setting of the problem (the precipitating factors), and (3) the source of the problem (the predisposing factors).

As they talked, Mr. Hendricks observed that Ole had symptoms of mild depression, anxiety and guilt. Only recently Ole’s mother had died. This was a part of the setting of the problem — a precipitating triggering factor. Mr. Hendricks knew that he must look further if he was to find the source of Ole’s problem. So he arranged a series of appointments with a psychiatrist. During these appointments Ole was encouraged to talk about his childhood. Predisposing factors of his problem began to appear. He was the youngest of five children, and seven years younger than the nearest sibling. He was the only boy. His father was killed in an accident when Ole was only five. His mother was a nervous person who focused her “smother” love on him, particularly after his father’s death. When he was a teen-ager, his mother opposed his dating, often embarrassing him in front of his friends. “Your first responsibility is to your mother,” she continually reminded him.

Finally he quit dating altogether. His sisters left home and married early, apparently to escape from their mother’s domination. When Ole finished high school, he was offered a scholarship at a college in another state. This meant leaving home, and, of course, his mother opposed it. But he determined to go anyway. Two days before he was to leave, his mother had a heart attack. Ole cancelled his plans and went to work with a local firm to support himself and his mother. Her physician later diagnosed that her symptoms were caused by “nerves.” The symptoms persisted so Ole made a home for his mother and himself. For the past 14 years his only “freedom” took the form of having a few Saturday night drinks at the corner bar.

It was now clear that a basic source of Ole’s drinking problem was a passive-dependency reaction. Ole had never been allowed to grow up and face life on his own. He was still tied to his mother’s apron strings. She controlled him through her symptoms and her insistence that his responsibility was to her. With every attempt for independence he was made to feel that he was deserting his “poor, old, sick mother.” Unconsciously, he built up an intense hostility toward her — a bitterness for which he felt considerable guilt. Then, at her death, the full weight of this guilt dropped upon him. He was left alone, anxious and dependent, faced with living without her.

In this dilemma he turned to the one other thing which through the years he had depended upon — the bottle. He was accustomed to venting his emotions this way. Intoxication enabled him to forget his fears and to be temporarily confident again. In addition, the intense guilt he felt over his hostility toward his dead mother seemed to demand punishment. Here again, alcohol seemed to fulfill this requirement in the discomfort of the hangover and the threat to his most important remaining asset — his job. At the bar he found sympathy among others who had similar problems and it gave him release to talk about his troubles.

As the psychiatrist worked through the case Ole began to gain insights into his own inadequacy.

As new understandings unfolded, he began to seek his own independence and personal development. But the greatest help of all came from an understanding Christian businessman who told Ole about the One who alone can satisfy the natural dependency needs of man. In time Ole gave his heart to Christ. With the understanding he had gained about himself and with the new life he had found in Christ, he did not need the bottle any longer. Instead, as a “newborn babe” in Christ, he began feeding on “the sincere milk of the Word.” He became active in the Lord’s work and gained many new friends. For the first time in his life he became an adequate, independent man.
The case of Ole illustrates how important it is for a counselor to take time to unravel a problem. The counselor must help his client look for clues. He must encourage him in the process of examining the past so that he might trace the origins of his trouble. It is obvious that Ole would have received no permanent help if Mr. Hendricks and the other counselors had been in a hurry.

If they had jumped to conclusions about the reason for Ole’s alcoholism, more than likely his basic dependency would have been overlooked.

But dependency is not the only problem with long roots. Many fears (in both children and adults) have sources that stem back to an early age. Children are often afraid of the dark, of storms, animals, water, and high places. They may fear the “bogey man,” competition or certain people.

All too often these fears persist into adulthood. In serious cases they may severely circumscribe the life of their victim. But the trained counselor knows that fear is the symptom, not the problem. The situations that arouse or trigger it may be considered its setting and are often clues to its source.

Fears that grip parents may be either consciously or unconsciously passed on to their children. When parents unwisely and continually threaten small children with such disciplinary measures as, “If you’re not good the bogey man will get you,” an ugly imprint is left that may be hard to erase. Traumatic experiences like falling into water and nearly drowning may leave an indelible mark. In addition there are conditioned fears which may be learned by the association of some harmless object with a frightening experience in which it played a role.

Take the case of Kathy, a second grader, who was brought to the school principal after she had begun screaming uncontrollably. That morning her class had taken a field trip to a farm and Kathy had apparently been terribly frightened by a white rabbit. The principal talked with Kathy, gained her confidence and helped to calm her. Then the principal called Kathy’s mother and requested that they discuss the situation with the school psychologist. Her mother arranged to stop by when she brought Kathy to school the next morning.

As Kathy’s mother and the psychologist discussed the girl’s uncontrollable fear, she remembered one incident that might have had some bearing on the case. She explained that she hesitated to mention it because it had happened when Kathy was only a baby.

“When Kathy was about 13 months old,” the mother related, we were visiting relatives in the country. They had a frisky white puppy who had taken quite a liking to Kathy. So much so, in fact, that he kept jumping up on her. One afternoon when Kathy was sleeping, the puppy jumped up by her and knocked the lamp over. It fell with a terrible crash. Kathy woke up screaming and it took me two whole hours to get her calmed down.

“What I don’t understand,” continued the mother, “is why she was always afraid of the puppy after that. The puppy had jumped up on her several times before but it had never scared her — she liked it.”

“Had Kathy been frightened by loud noises before?”

“Oh yes — in fact she was quite sensitive to noise. I’m sure it was the crash of the lamp that scared her so badly ... But she may have thought it had something to do with the puppy.”
“Yes, undoubtedly she transferred the fear of the noise to the puppy. Children often do that — even adults. We call it association or learning by conditioning.”

“I can see why it might have made her afraid of dogs,” said the mother, “but why should she be afraid of rabbits or other animals?”

“This is very interesting. We have found that, especially with children an idea often spreads out to take in similar things. This process is called generalization. The idea of the original object of fear, the white puppy, probably extended to take in all white puppies and eventually all small white furry animals.”

“Well, I can see that. But can anything be done to get rid of this fear?”

“Yes, these fears can usually be eliminated. In fact, they are often outgrown. In Kathy’s case, as she has pleasant experiences with white furry animals, these times will outweigh and overcome the unhappy ones. In addition, quietly talking with her about her fear will help her see that there is no reason to be afraid. Then, in time, her feelings will change.”

As the school psychologist and Kathy’s mother worked on the basis of this understanding, they were able to help Kathy overcome this phobia.

As in the case of Kathy, a counselor must encourage people to reach back into the past, to re-examine almost forgotten experiences, to dig out the tap-root of the problem. This was true in “Ole’s” case, in “Kathy’s” case, and in most of the cases counselors encounter.

But such treatment takes patience and time. Yet, when we deal with human personalities, can we begrudge the time and effort it takes to see a person become well adjusted? Helping a person recover psychologically is, in many ways, more rewarding than seeing him recover physically.

Think of it this way: a psychologically sound person can face physical illness, but a psychologically disturbed person often cannot even face good health!