The Psychology of Counseling

Professional Techniques for Pastors, Teachers, Youth Leaders, and All Who Are Engaged in the Incomparable Art of Counseling

by

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Chapter 4 - Professional Ethics

“I’m certainly glad that you will be assisting me,” Pastor White told the new associate pastor. “We have a wonderful church family. The people here are gracious, cooperative and for the most part, godly Christians. But, as in any church, there are also many problems — family difficulties, marriage upheavals, youth problems, and many other serious situations. I have found that a great deal of my time is taken with counseling. I surely welcome your help in this needy area.”

As these two servants of God discussed their responsibilities in counseling, they spoke about the importance of observing professional ethics. “All one’s ‘know how’ and techniques amount to very little if he is not careful about his counseling ethics,” Pastor White pointed out.

Indeed, ethical standards are essential to all counseling. Every counselor must consider them. They are too important to overlook or ignore.

Perhaps the first and most important element in professional ethics is the confidential treatment of all personal information. After you have seen a number of people with the same kind of problem, it is easy to feel that such difficulties are routine. But to the counselee, his problem is one-of-a-kind. No other situation is quite the same. He has come to you because he trusts you. He wants understanding, sympathy and respect for the seriousness of his situation. As he begins to reveal his problem he will expect you to guard the information with care.

Another important reason for keeping case material confidential is the effect it may have on others. Many personal disclosures may not seem shocking to you. But to the counselee’s family, friends and associates, it could be devastating. For years he may have hidden the fact that he harbored strong feelings of hostility toward a loved one. No one may know of his sexual misbehavior, dishonesty, guilt or anxiety. Now that he has revealed this, you are the only person who holds this information. Naturally, if you violate his trust, either intentionally or through carelessness, severe repercussions may result. This will only worsen his condition and weaken whatever assets he still has. Personal information falling into the wrong hands can cause much trouble for the counselee. He may lose friends, be ostracized, lose his job, be sued or suffer estrangement from his family.

A doctor, lawyer or minister is protected by law from being forced to reveal confidential information given him by a client. This is a matter of tradition. Surely the Christian counselor has no less responsibility. Personal information must be guarded as a sacred trust.

Many counselors intend to be confidential but often information leaks out through carelessness. Just because a person is a wife, husband, relative or personal friend does not mean that we should share strict confidences with them. Undoubtedly many a minister
has dwarfed or destroyed his counseling ministry because he has shared personal confidences with his spouse.

Another caution concerns the handling of written information. If possible, case material should be filed securely in a locked place. It is not that we expect someone to steal anything. But church workers and even officials have been known to succumb to a little “harmless” curiosity about Mrs. “X” who looks so worried and has been seeing the pastor for the past three weeks.

“But,” you may ask, “doesn’t it help to give some information to a deacon or spiritual leader who is competent to help or pray for the person?”

At times this may be wise. But if so, it is better to explain the situation verbally. One suggestion is to observe the policy the government follows about defense secrets: let only the person know who needs to know and then only as much as he needs to know to do his job.

It is not advisable for the counselee to see your notes on his case. They will seem cold, abstract and critical and may reveal facts about himself that he is not ready to accept.

Another professional pitfall is the temptation for ministers and other public speakers to use case material for illustrations. This practice presents serious drawbacks. Naturally names are changed and other identifying information is altered, but still there is a risk. If the person who supplied the material hears it, or even hears about the illustration, he will feel sure he has been betrayed. No one in the audience may have the slightest suspicion as to whom the speaker referred. But the person involved will think everyone knows. People with problems feel that they are transparent. Obviously, if an individual believes he has been betrayed, a counselor’s ability to further help him will be lost. Even when the one you are discussing is not in the vicinity, another with a similar problem, and whom you have counseled, may think you are speaking about him.

When we use case material for illustrations too frequently, other people with problems are hesitant to come to us. They are afraid of also becoming illustrations.

Should a counselor, then, never use cases for illustrations in messages or talks? Not necessarily. But when he does, the following precautions should be followed:

1. Do not use material from cases you are presently carrying.
2. Do not use material similar to that of any current case.
3. Do not always reveal that the source of your illustration stems from counseling.
4. In any event, change identifying information.

Confidence is a precious commodity. It should be safeguarded at all times.
But protecting confidential information is not the only aspect of professional ethics. There are several others to consider.

First: *Do not talk about other counselors.* It is quite possible that a person may have seen another counselor before he came to you. This counselor’s technique and philosophy (especially if he is not a Christian) may differ considerably from yours. You may also find yourself *competing* with him to give this person more help than he did. You may be tempted to criticize him to the counselee. Criticizing another counselor is like “knocking a competitor’s product. It destroys confidence in the one who is making the criticism. A counselor is wise to concentrate on helping the person concerned rather than minimizing the other counselor.

Of course, *a counselor does not discuss others with whom he is now counseling or has counseled.* One can never be sure that others are unknown to those with whom he is currently working. Also, a person may get the impression that he also will be discussed. This will increase defensiveness and destroy rapport.

*Counselors should not touch a counselee unnecessarily,* especially of the opposite sex. Although it is important to be cordial, we must also be discreet. A counselor must be especially careful when working with those who are upset or disturbed. Such people may have strong, unnatural cravings for affection. They are more apt to misinterpret a mere friendly gesture. Those who have sex problems may project their feelings toward the counselor, considering his kindnesses as personal advances.

Slanderous stories have started this way. But counselors sometimes bring criticism on themselves. Even if the disturbed person does not project his feelings, much harm can be caused by unwise physical contact and other stimulating, affectionate gestures. As for therapy, it tends to make the counselee more dependent upon the counselor. He is likely to become affectionately and personally attached to you. Since counselors are human and have affectional needs, this may seem pleasant at first. But the counselee may begin to develop intense feelings. Rapport will be destroyed and he will be left in worse condition than before.

But what does one do if, in spite of all precautions, a person still makes advances?

Sometimes this happens — and through no fault of your own. If it does, remain firm but kind. Explain the counselee’s own feelings to him. If he persists in making advances, you should drop his case and ask him not to see you again. Unfortunately, some counselors have yielded to emotionally disturbed counselees and have become involved in homosexual practices, love affairs and other shameful activities.

Naturally it is much easier to prevent personal advances than to cope with them after they arise. Desirable ways to prevent them are these:

(1) Avoid physical contacts other than shaking hands.
(2) Avoid satisfying your own desires intellectually by probing for unnecessary intimate details. It is well to keep in mind that when your own personal desires are unsatisfied, it is easy to be unconsciously seductive toward another person. After marriage a man may find himself even more vulnerable at times, especially if he and his wife are separated for an extended period. This fact is so important that Paul discusses it thoroughly in I Corinthians 7.

(3) Keep the counselee from becoming emotionally involved too fast. This can usually be done by limiting the length of your interview to an hour or less. The therapeutic (getting well) process is not limited only to the time spent in an actual counseling session. If it is really effective, the process will continue its effectiveness between interviews. As the counselee gains insights he will become less and less dependent on you. This should be your goal. But you need to make certain that some hidden need of your own does not interfere with the therapeutic process.

Also, be sure you counsel in an appropriate place. Counseling is something like surgery. The place where the operation is performed is important. In surgery a sterile operating room is used to prevent infection. For maximum effectiveness in counseling, an appropriate place is also advisable.

The place where counseling is done brings with it many subtle influences. Such things as distractions, unhealthy associations with the place of counseling, lack of privacy, immature behavior on the part of the counselor can hinder the therapeutic process.

A wise counselor avoids counseling in inappropriate places like a secluded corner or a parked car. Not only are such locations unprofessional but there are also many distractions. To counsel in such places is indiscreet. Even the most Freudian analyst sees little psychological similarity between foam rubber car seats and the analytical couch!

Closed doors and secret sessions can lead to suspicion and criticism. This is why some pastors take steps to guard against unfavorable gossip. A nearby secretary, a door left ajar or a convenient but not distracting window may assure needed privacy without suspicious seclusiveness.

But what about a private home? This still has some disadvantages. Here, too, there may be distractions. The counselee may remain defensive due to lack of privacy — the danger of being overheard by other family members. Also, the counseling session may be confused with a social situation.

Some locations lend themselves to counseling much better than others. Experience shows that most counselors find the ideal place to be their own offices. Here distractions are at a minimum. Too, the counselee comes to feel that this is a special place where help can be received. Familiar surroundings also aid the counselor in handling a person’s problems with ease and confidence. If a Scripture verse is needed, his Bible is near. If a call for further referral is warranted, his address book is on his desk. When he wishes to
recommend a certain book, his library is at hand. The counselee learns to appreciate the efficiency of the counselor in helping him with his problems.

A fixed place and time greatly help to structure a counseling situation. The desk and surroundings become a symbol of the counselor’s competence. The counseling relationship can be clearly defined. This gives a counselee the assurance he needs.

Another aspect of professional ethics concerns attitude toward referrals. A counselor should recognize his limitations. When a case is not within his training and ability he should refer the counselee to another specialist such as a medical doctor, a Christian counselor, a psychologist or a lawyer. No one counselor is competent to handle all cases. It is a sign of maturity when a counselor knows that he is not capable of making all of the necessary diagnoses and is willing to refer a counselee to one who may be better able to meet his particular needs. This attitude will add stature to the counselor and people will respect him for it.

Professional ethics, essential to everyone who counsels, may mean the difference between failure and success.
Chapter 5 - Counseling Arrangements

The old saying, “For want of a nail . . . a kingdom was lost,” points up the significance of details in life. In counseling, too, details are very important. In fact, some of the “little things” carry so much weight that they often make or break all counseling efforts. Effective counselors are conscious of details. Thus, they give careful thought to such arrangements as:

- Setting the Appointment
- Preparing for the Interview
- Beginning the Interview
- Determining the Length of the Interview
- Closing the Interview
- Recording the Interview
- Handling Persistent Cases

1. Setting the Appointment

A counseling session is worthy of a definite appointment. Even though a fee may not be involved, the help received is valuable and the time spent should be established in a professional manner.

Making a definite appointment tends to increase your counselee’s respect for you. He knows that you are efficient and orderly, that you are taking his case seriously. In addition, a regularly scheduled appointment indicates a wise stewardship of time.

2. Preparing for the Interview

A person coming for counseling should be received with at least as much courtesy as an invited guest. He may already feel guilty for “taking your time.” Thus, he may react adversely to any sign that he has interrupted your plans or is in any way imposing upon you. This is the reason it is important to spend a few moments preparing for your interviews with him.

A room (and desk) in readiness makes it clear that you were expecting your counselee. Stacks of papers or other work on the desk may impress a person as to your busy schedule, but it can also provide food for his guilt feelings. He may marvel at how kind you are to lay aside this work in order to see him. But he will also consider how selfish he is for taking your time. This can prove embarrassing and make him ill at ease. But a counselor and a room (or office) in readiness indicates to the counselee that he is expected — and wanted.

For maximum comfort and rapport, the counselee should not have to face bright light. He should also have a choice of seating. Thus he need not sit across the desk from the counselor unless he prefers to do so.
With counselees who are especially dependent, the counselor may find it advisable to arbitrarily set the time limit. However, in most cases it is wise to discuss the counseling time together and thereby reach a mutual understanding.

When setting time limits, several factors are usually taken into account:

(a) Your time: You should avoid undue demands upon your time which would impose upon your schedule or which might make you unconsciously resent the counselee. Also, your family has a right to some of your time. Care must be taken that every spare moment is not occupied with counseling. Problems are very demanding.

(b) The counselee’s time: The counselor should be sensitive to the strain he might place on the counselee’s relationships to other people, for example, his employer or his family.

(c) The nature of the problem: Each case is different. Some problems may require only informational discussion and nothing particularly emotional. Since these discussions will often be concluded in a single interview, it is sometimes best to extend the time beyond the customary hour limit. For example, Wally, a bright and likeable young high school senior had recently dedicated his life to full time Christian service. He was happy in his decision but he did not know into which field the Lord might be leading him. So he went to his pastor for certain information. The pastor spent considerable time one afternoon discussing the matter.

Another kind of problem may call for a “standard” counseling interview. Such problems are not particularly involved. Structured time limits of 45 to 60 minutes for these sessions are usually optimum.

Another kind of problem may be more serious. In cases where highly emotional, unconscious material is likely to present itself or where strong dependency motives exist, it is usually best to limit the time of each interview. Perhaps 30 to 45 minutes may be desirable. A shorter period of time tends to limit excessive leaning on the counselor. It also helps prevent the too rapid escape of repressed material. A disturbed individual who is allowed to continue too long during one interview may become frightened and balk at further therapy.

(d) The degree of progress: Other things being equal, it is wise to have frequent short interviews (30 - 45 minutes, twice a week) during the initial catharsis period. When a person enters the stage of insight and positive planning, longer and less frequent interviews (45 - 60 minutes, once a week) may be advisable. During the follow-up period you may wish to see him for a brief session at monthly intervals. In general, the frequency of interviews should be inversely proportional to their length.
5. Closing the Interview

At first the counselor will want to take the responsibility for bringing the Session to a close. Naturally, the interview is not terminated suddenly as the second hand sweeps past its zenith. The counselee should be prepared. Perhaps at the beginning of the interview the counselor may casually say, “If it is all right with you, we’ll spend 30 minutes to an hour discussing your problem.” Then, as the session progresses, he may suggest, “For the next few minutes let’s discuss . . .” At the end the counselor might comment, “Our time has gone by so fast. We’ll have to close now. Shall we continue our discussion next week?”

What is the purpose of preparing the counselee? It gives him security. He knows where he stands and how much time he has. He need not be caught short. This tends to limit “beating around the bush” — which saves your time and his. Because the time limit has been agreed upon from the start, he need not feel that something he said may have been offensive to you and prompted you to close the interview.

As you near the end of the interview you will find it advantageous to tie the session together by summarizing the main thoughts discussed. This will not only serve as a recapitulation; it will bring the session to a natural, desirable close.

6. Keeping a Record of the Interview

Each counselor develops his own method of keeping case notes. But every counselor who works with more than a few people a year should keep records of some kind, even though they may be brief. No matter how phenomenal a memory a person may possess, he is likely to confuse the details of different cases, unless, after the session, he makes a few notes. One also tends to overlook the subtle nuances of each individual case and generalizes among similar ones — unless he keeps a written summary.

Besides the value good notes afford in helping to understand the counselee and sense his progress, the counselor’s notes on various cases can provide an index to his own professional growth.

It is usually best not to take notes in the presence of the counselee inasmuch as the counselor is prevented from giving his full attention to the discussion. Furthermore, the client may not feel free to divulge certain information if he sees the counselor taking copious notes. There are times, however, when the counselor may ask permission to jot down a point or two. Occasionally a written note during the counseling session enables the counselor to remember some pertinent fact. Also, a thought may come to the counselor which he wishes to introduce later. Simply noting it will help him remember it at an appropriate time.

Methods for keeping records vary considerably. Some counselors keep essential information on convenient 5 x 7 cards. Others write more extensive notes and keep them
in file folders. One can suit himself. But enough detailed information should be kept to recall the case should there be a need to refer to it in the future. One caution: it is essential that confidential information be kept securely out of reach of prying eyes. Just as the counselor does not want his innermost thoughts to become topics of general discussion, neither does the counselee.

7. Handling Persistent Cases

Unfortunately, not every case can be brought to a successful conclusion in a few interviews. Worse still, some cannot be completed in any number of interviews. These are the perennial, persistent cases.

Some individuals have extremely dependent personality structures. These are often the most difficult to handle. Such people come back again and again. Unless you take firm steps to set the limits, they may push you to the point where you actually reject them.

Their extreme dependency has characteristically been met with rejection by other people and, if you show them much attention or sympathy, they will attach themselves to you tenaciously. Such was the case of Elmer. He was in his twenties, unemployed, unmarried and generally “unwanted.” When he found that the pastor was kind to him, Elmer beat a path to the church office. He came and came again. Finally it became a menace to the pastor’s time. The pastor did not want to hurt Elmer’s feelings and yet he realized he could not help him. “He has some kind of mental problem,” the pastor often thought.

There is no magic solution to the problem of “clinging” clients. It is very hard not to hurt them. But, of course, if possible you want to avoid rejecting them. It is best to offer sincere help, yet set definite limits as to the time you will spend with them, then refer them to specialists if the case so demands.

Details, from setting appointments to keeping records, are essential in any counseling situation. Because these arrangements appear to be peripheral to the psychotherapy itself, some counselors underestimate their importance. Yet, failure to properly take care of these details can handicap your very best efforts. All are essential to your success in counseling.
Counseling is a process, not a lecture. Too often after a counselor has talked with a person for a few minutes, or even an hour, he may think that he has “solved” the problem. But effective counseling is seldom done quickly. Since counseling is a process, it requires time. Has anyone ever phoned you saying, “I need to talk with you for a few minutes”? True, he may need to talk with you, but surely for more than a few minutes. Undoubtedly he needs to discuss his need with someone for several hours. When people have rather serious problems, you may be certain that it has taken years for them to develop. Naturally, it takes a number of counseling sessions to do much about these maladjustments. Serious difficulties are not solved with the exchange of a few words. Undoubtedly, one of the biggest mistakes that ministers, youth directors, and other Christian leaders make in counseling is to consider counseling as a lecture rather than a process.

“But,” you say, “I’m a minister and I am very busy. I marry people, bury people, settle quarrels, prepare messages, and I must spend some time with my family.” This is true. And you may not have as much time to counsel as you would like. However, as a person comes to know the importance of counseling and as he learns additional professional skills, he usually gives it a more prominent place.

Why does counseling require so much time? A number of reasons. When you counsel you are actually expecting several things to take place. One of these, of course, is that both you and the counselee develop a thorough understanding of the problem itself. Precisely, what is the problem? What are the ramifications? Who are the people involved?

Also, you are seeking the true causes of the problem. When you “lecture” to a person – talk with him for a few minutes, you do not give yourself or your counselee time to consider the real problem. But when you meet with a person for several sessions, you can lead him to uncover the roots of his difficulty.

Even if you should see the sources of a problem immediately, the counselee may not. And it may require several sessions before he is able to grasp the actual difficulty. He will know the symptoms – but he may not be able to delineate the problem. One reason is that causes are often hidden – subtly concealed underneath strong feelings and varying circumstances. The counselee may require several sessions before he understands and accepts the real problem. When a person is preoccupied with symptoms, it is often difficult for him to see through to the true causes. Furthermore, he may be so upset with his immediate troubles that he has only one goal in mind – to get out of his present “hot water.”

There is no substitute for time. An old Latin proverb states, “Time discovers the truth.” (Veritatum dies aperit.) In counseling, we can attest this fact. Time, indeed, is a truth finder. When several sessions are arranged, the counselor also has an opportunity to think the problem through. Perhaps you have had the experience of giving advice, then later thinking of much better solutions. You have said to yourself, “I wish I had thought of that before. That would have been a much better suggestion than the one I made.”

People need time to change. A counselee, for example, might like to feel differently, but changes in attitudes do not come automatically. Several sessions may be required. It was Plutarch, a first
century Greek philosopher, who said, “Trust to time; it is the wisest of all counselors.” This, in a
sense, is true.

When counseling is a process rather than a lecture, it affords more opportunity to pray about the
matter—both on your part and on the part of the counselee. We often see the motto, “Prayer
Changes Things.” If this is true (and it is), then the more we pray, the more things will change.
God is in the “changing business.” He gives us new outlooks and new attitudes. Setting up
counseling on the basis of several sessions permits more time for prayer for all concerned.

You cannot blame people for expecting you to solve their problems in two minutes or two hours.
They come to you because their burdens are pressing. They need and want help. And they want it
as soon as possible. But permanent help is not usually supplied in a “rush order.” It is up to you to
guide the counselee into a process of several sessions.

One night at the close of a youth rally a number of young people came to the front of the
auditorium to meet the speaker. One of the boys shook the speaker’s hand and said, “My name is
Bill. Could I speak to you about a problem, please.”

“Certainly,” he replied, “but I am wondering, Bill, if you can wait for a few minutes until I have a
little more time.”

Bill agreed that he could “hang around” for a while. The speaker greeted the others who were
waiting. Then he talked with Bill alone. Immediately he sensed that the boy’s problem was a
serious one. So the speaker made arrangements to see Bill several times during the next few
weeks. Soon Bill was making real progress. How much wiser this was than handing out a “pat
solution” while shaking the boy’s hand at the close of the meeting.

People’s problems are serious and they should be dealt with seriously. Most difficulties have been
a long time in making—and it will take time to resolve them. A counselor is never at his best until
he recognizes the fact that counseling is a process—not a lecture.
Chapter 7 - YOUR BEST ATTENTION

There are many embarrassing moments in life. But one of the most humiliating comes to the counselor when he is caught short because he has failed to give the counselee his undivided attention. His mind wanders a little and a few minutes later he is left guessing what the counselee has or has not said! It has happened to everyone, even to experienced counselors.

A pastor was counseling with a woman about her problem. After she had talked continuously for nearly ten minutes, scarcely taking a breath, he became disinterested. A few minutes later his mind had strayed miles away. Suddenly the pastor realized that he had not been listening. Almost immediately the embarrassing fact stared him squarely in the face: he needed some vital information about the woman’s family, but alas, he was afraid that she might have already given it.

A person readily senses whether a counselor is wholeheartedly listening to what he is saying. Each individual problem is vitally important to the one concerned, and a troubled person cannot fathom a counselor not remembering the things just said.

One of the basic principles of counseling is to give the counselee complete attention. But unfortunately this aspect of counseling is often ignored. Take, for example, the minister who, as he shakes hands with the members of his congregation, throws in a little counseling on the side. This, of course, hardly deserves to be called counseling. It is impossible under these circumstances to give people the undivided attention they need.

Many a speaker makes the mistake of counseling with people as they come to him after a meeting. Suddenly the speaker finds himself surrounded by about twenty-five or thirty “clients” all wanting to greet him. Most of them seize this opportunity to mention some problem. This, they feel, is their chance to get some advice.

When a speaker is surrounded by numerous well-wishers and hand shakers at the close of an address, he should, if possible, arrange some other time when he may meet any with serious problems and consider each case individually.

Take, also, the case of the youth leader who is conducting a question and answer period. If he is not careful, he will publicly counsel a few people whom he should see privately.

There are Christian leaders who sometimes try to counsel as they walk from one building to another, out in hallways, or various other places. Under these conditions they cannot possibly devote their best attention to either the counselee or the problem.

What can be done when people seek personal attention at inconvenient times and places? Every counselor should consider all of these gestures as contacts for counseling; not counseling sessions in themselves. In other words, if at the close of a Sunday morning church service a lady corners a minister about a problem, he should suggest that she phone to make an appointment to see him later. Every minister knows that delivering a sermon is giving of himself. He may be so exhausted that he will not even retain details of problems disclosed during split second greetings at the door.

It is a disadvantage to attempt counseling with a person when you are not quietly seated. Being relaxed is an initial step in therapy. Furthermore, it is an injustice to the counselee to allow him to believe that you are helping him if you are unable to give him your undivided attention.
A counselor cannot possibly understand all the ramifications of a person’s problem unless he concentrates on it. And when a counselee says something, he should not be asked to repeat it. The counselor should be so intent on what is being said that he not only perceives the main thoughts but also picks up accompanying nuances and overtones.

When you arrange to see a person in an appropriate, quiet setting, it is easier to think things through and analyze the problem. It is only as you grasp the details that you can understand a person’s actual involvement. For example, a counselor talked with a lady about a certain situation that existed in her home. If he had not listened intently he might not have realized that it was primarily not her problem; rather, it was actually her sister’s problem. Her interest was indirect. So it is that when a counselor gives a person his utmost attention, he can learn the extent of the counselee’s involvement.

When we listen carefully we are apt to pick up vital bits of information. This was true of a psychologist who talked with a man about his son. In a passing remark the father mentioned that the boy once had a little seizure. Because he was alert, the psychologist pursued the statement and found that it was a clue to the entire problem. During the following sessions it was revealed that the boy had experienced a number of convulsions. In fact, his persistent facial tics and bodily twitching were actually being caused by an epileptic condition. If the counselor had not been attentive he might not have caught this. As a result, the boy might not have received the help he so desperately needed.

People are continually sending out signals to one another. They unwittingly tell much about themselves in all that they do and say. By their appearance, dress, walk, talk, preoccupations and in many subtle ways they indicate the kind of persons they are. Psychologists and psychiatrists take professional courses to learn these signs and their interpretations. They also give tests which render valuable information. But the average counselor can also pick up many signals by being observant and alert. These signals will undoubtedly fall into such categories as general health, physical ability, emotional health, social poise, knowledge, intelligence, preoccupations, spirituality, adaptability and other personality characteristics.

When the counselor quietly observes and carefully listens, many hidden aspects come to light. A new world of information and understanding is open to the counselor who gives a counselee his best attention!
Chapter 8 - THE VALUE OF DISCUSSION

When God created Adam and Eve He gave them the power of speech, and ever since, people have spent much of their time talking. The air waves are flooded with words—words from a baby’s prattle, a lecturer’s podium, words in every language and in every circumstance. It makes little difference whether the words are said in a shop or in an office, over a telephone or across a back fence, at clubs, at parties, at church or at home in an easy chair, people will talk. They must talk. Language is an outlet for human expression.

There is an old saying that “talk is cheap.” But this is not always true. Talking may have real value. Although some talk seems to have little or no significance, it is usually more than just a succession of words. It is therapy.

Talking is thinking. A good way to consider a thing is to put it into words. Some authorities claim that there can be no thought without words. And, of course, expressing a thought out loud helps to clarify it.

Yes, talking is thinking—but it involves more than that. Talking is sifting. Discussion helps us to sift our good ideas from the poor ones.

Have you ever had a “tremendous” idea, one that you thought was “great”—great, that is, until you told it to someone else? Then, somehow, it just seemed to fall flat! It did not sound so good out loud. Perhaps one or two points were worth salvaging. But for the most part, the idea just could not stand up under the audio test.

Why do spoken ideas usually seem different from ones that have never been verbally expressed? Because speech is an effective filtering agent. Many things flood our minds, but talking sifts our ideas to separate the chaff from the wheat.

People need to sift their thoughts. And this is where the counselor is so valuable. When you counsel, you are helping people sort their ideas. Many people make wrong decisions simply because there is no one to go through this “sifting” process with them, no one with whom they can discuss their thoughts.

Talking is clarifying—bringing into sharper focus. It helps us to define just what we really do think. It shows up the true issues and points out possible danger or good.

Betty, for example, was a high school girl who wanted to quit school. She disliked the teachers and had few friends. Everything was wrong. Finally Betty saw the youth director at church. He encouraged her to talk. As she did, she began to clarify her thinking. “All” school wasn’t bad, and “all” teachers were not stupid. In fact, it wasn’t “school” that she really wanted to run away from.

Through much discussion she came to see that most of her difficulty stemmed from the fact that she was poor in Geometry. Also, she faced up to the fact that her study habits were poor. So instead of running away from school, she and the youth director discussed some basic guides to improve her study habits. She also asked her math teacher for extra help. In a short time Betty’s entire attitude toward school improved. What happened? She had talked the situation through sufficiently to clarify her specific problems. Through discussion she gained new insights. Now she knew which direction to pursue. But it was not until she had discussed these things thoroughly that Betty received the help she needed.
**Talking is release.** Through discussion we rid ourselves of poisonous feelings and pent up emotions. After we have aired our thoughts we see things differently. Even the world about us seems to take on a more pleasant atmosphere.

Janet, for example, was a young married woman who lived with her in-laws. She was most unhappy but she had no one with whom to talk over her problem. Finally she decided to tell her pastor about it. She really had not expected to say much, but after she began, she could not stop. At the end of a long counseling session she took a deep breath and said, “Pastor, you don’t know how much this has helped me. Having someone to talk to—just getting it off my chest—gives me relief. Now everything seems better.”

And our emotions are that way. When feelings are continually suppressed, we are likely to become nervous or ill. Our tensions may manifest themselves in a variety of symptoms. But talking brings relief. When we see things more clearly, we feel differently and we are better able to cope with difficulties.

**Talking is therapy.** It has been said that people who have serious problems seldom make good adjustments until they talk. Sadly enough, however, many people have no one with whom to talk. Can a person share his problem with the neighbors? No, neighbors usually want to do the talking and advising themselves. Yet, that is not what a person needs. He needs to do the talking. What about talking the problem over with a husband or wife or other relative? There are times when this is possible; but in many instances, family members are part of the problem. When this is the case, they merely become a stone wall to discussion.

To whom, then, shall they turn? This is where you play an important role. People come to you because you are a counselor with professional skill. You can draw them out, help them discuss their problems, find release, think things through, sift their ideas, clarify their thinking, gain new insights, rid themselves of impulses, trust in the Lord and become well adjusted. THIS IS COUNSELING!
Chapter 9 - ACCEPTING THE COUNSELEE

One hurdle which every counselor faces is his own attitude toward the person he is counseling. Counselors are often prone to judge others rather than patiently gain an understanding of the forces working in their lives. Until a counselor eliminates condemnatory attitudes, he cannot possibly offer his best. Blaming a person is no solution.

What are some of the attitudes that one must erase before he can counsel effectively? They are many, but here are the typical ones. Careful examination will help a counselor evaluate his own attitudes.

He Should Have Known Better.

Undoubtedly all of us have, at some time, allowed this attitude to throw up a barrier between us and the counselee. But this point of view also suggests, “I did know better. I am much wiser than he.” Naturally, this attitude of superiority does not aid us in establishing rapport with a person.

If He Had Stayed Away from the Wrong Crowd, He Would Not Be in Trouble.

Here we show our resentment, not only of the counselee, but of his friends. Yet, there evidently is something in his associations that meets his basic needs. A person is usually drawn into certain friendships because they seem to offer him something that he lacks. The fact that a person associates with the wrong people should be a clue to the counselor.

A Little Plain, Common Sense Would Have Prevented This Trouble.

Common sense is important. But most people do not function or make decisions on the basis of what they know. They act on how they feel. Certain experiences may have warped their outlook. Part of the counselor’s responsibility is to help them gain different attitudes. When they feel differently, they will act differently.

The Right Kind of Discipline Would Have Straightened Him Out.

Discipline plays an important role. But self discipline is even more desirable.

It is true that some parents contribute to delinquency. But many have sincerely done the best they have known. It does little good to blame parents. Even if parents are at fault, we cannot undo the past. Our challenge is to work with the problem as we find it.

Concerning punishment, people in trouble usually suffer for their own deeds—many times over. And when they come to a counselor they respond to acceptance rather than further rejection. They deserve to be understood and helped.

He Is Just a Trouble Maker.

When we do not understand the causes of behavior or know how to help a person, it is easy to chalk up all trouble to a “mean streak,” or a “bad disposition.” But this suggests no remedy. We still do not know why he is a trouble maker or what makes him act the way he does. Problems are usually deeper than a person’s actions.
He Got What He Deserved.

True, “Our sins will find us out” and “the way of the transgressor is hard.” But counselors are not to mete out punishment. “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.” The counselor’s role is to help uncover the causes of behavior, then aid the counselee in gaining new direction in life.

He Was Just Weak and Easily Led.

God’s Word tells us, “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

This applies to the total human race; not just one individual. We all have weak natures. In addition, some people have had unfortunate experiences. If a person has been led into trouble, our concern is to learn why, then help plan a program of rehabilitation. Side-stepping an issue by calling a person “weak” offers no solution, nor does it cast any new light on human nature.

He Is Only Trying to Get Sympathy.

This is often true. The human heart reaches out desperately for friendship and understanding. In fact, one of the basic psychological needs of man is love and affection. But some people have been denied this essential at every turn in life. As Christian counselors we can lead a person to Christ who alone fully meets the need of love and affection.

There Is Something Physically or Mentally Wrong with Him.

Since there are many related causes of behavior, this is quite possible. Studies show that many behavior, emotional, and mental problems have their origins in physiological disorders. In a recent study of delinquent boys, for example, more than twenty-five percent were found to have neurological impairments (brain injuries). But such causes do not excuse us from counseling effectively. Our responsibility may lie in referring clients to a specialist.

He’s Just Low Class. That Kind of Person Will Always Be That Way.

Some people do come from families classified as “lower class.” In such cases, their experiences and values may differ greatly from ours. But this information should only help us to understand them better. Knowledge of a person’s background should give us more insight and patience.

Why Doesn’t He Snap Out of It?

Undoubtedly he would if he could. But this is precisely the reason he is talking to you—he can’t. Most people in trouble are trapped; they are emotionally and mentally immobilized. They must be helped out of their situation. And this is the great privilege of counselors.

He Must Be Lacking in Good Spiritual Training.

Some people have had excellent spiritual training. But like others (even David), they have been “drawn away of their own lust and enticed” (James 1:14). If a person is a Christian, he needs restoration—renewed fellowship with Christ. If he is unsaved, he needs to be born again. We have a spiritual obligation to everyone with whom we counsel.

A Good Lecture Should Straighten Him Out.
Although instruction is always a valuable part of adjustment, people rarely respond favorably to lectures. They already feel condemned. They need a *process* involving a number of counseling sessions. They must gain new attitudes and new skills. They stand in need of a new nature through Christ. And these are not obtained through lectures.

*Why Didn’t Someone Help Him Long Ago?*

Undoubtedly someone should have. On the other hand he may not have *wanted* help earlier. Now he is ready and is seeking help. Perhaps God has brought you into his life to assist him. You may become a great blessing, both to the counselee and those who are close to him. Through this experience you may also become a stronger, more mature person yourself.

Although a counselor may not condone, it is not his place to condemn. God hates sin, but He loves the sinner. Jesus set an example of acceptance when He did not condemn the woman taken in adultery. Even in a clear-cut case of immorality Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.” Likewise, the counselor may reject the unfavorable conditions that brought about the problem, but he accepts the counselee. He can never expect to help unless he meets his counselee where he is. *When the counselor’s attitudes are constructive, they are likely to be greeted with success!*
in file folders. One can suit himself. But enough detailed information should be kept to recall the case should there be a need to refer to it in the future. One caution: it is essential that confidential information be kept securely out of reach of prying eyes. Just as the counselor does not want his innermost thoughts to become topics of general discussion, neither does the counselee.

7. Handling Persistent Cases

Unfortunately, not every case can be brought to a successful conclusion in a few interviews. Worse still, some cannot be completed in any number of interviews. These are the perennial, persistent cases.

Some individuals have extremely dependent personality structures. These are often the most difficult to handle. Such people come back again and again. Unless you take firm steps to set the limits, they may push you to the point where you actually reject them.

Their extreme dependency has characteristically been met with rejection by other people and, if you show them much attention or sympathy, they will attach themselves to you tenaciously. Such was the case of Elmer. He was in his twenties, unemployed, unmarried and generally “unwanted.” When he found that the pastor was kind to him, Elmer beat a path to the church office. He came and came again. Finally it became a menace to the pastor’s time. The pastor did not want to hurt Elmer’s feelings and yet he realized he could not help him. “He has some kind of mental problem,” the pastor often thought.

There is no magic solution to the problem of “clinging” clients. It is very hard not to hurt them. But, of course, if possible you want to avoid rejecting them. It is best to offer sincere help, yet set definite limits as to the time you will spend with them, then refer them to specialists if the case so demands.

Details, from setting appointments to keeping records, are essential in any counseling situation. Because these arrangements appear to be peripheral to the psychotherapy itself, some counselors underestimate their importance. Yet, failure to properly take care of these details can handicap your very best efforts. All are essential to your success in counseling.