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# UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH CLIENT RESISTANCE

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This article is based on the assumption that resistance involves clients' natural attempts to maintain homeostasis in their lives (Satir, 1991; Bridges, 1980) and that a counsellor's prime responsibility is to understand the legitimate and salient messages being sent by resistant or difficult clients (Kottler, 1992). Resistance is defined as the client's deliberate or unconscious unwillingness to change. I present transition theory as the backdrop for understanding resistance to change as a positive emotional resource to which one listens and works. It is my hope that by presenting a positive model for interpreting and responding to resistant behaviour, counsellors will receive encouragement for working collaboratively with clients they experience as being difficult.

## **Resistance as the Client's Core Message**

The starting point of a collaborative approach to counselling is the client and his or her core message. The core message is the client's current emotional experience and the content that underlies this experience (Egan, 1994). Whenever resistance to the counsellor or to the change process is displayed by the client, that resistance is a significant part of the core message. Understanding the emotional experience of resistance

enables a counsellor to reframe resistance as a positive element in the counselling process. The client who appears resistant is not bad. There is no ill will tied to the client's resistant behaviour. The client is most likely not intending to be difficult. This resistance or reluctance, on the client's part is simply a very real and powerful part of his or her immediate experience.

Resistance is a very salient part of the client's core message and, as such, it needs to be heard and responded to with respect and compassion. Clients often send conflicting implicit messages of wanting to change and at the same time not wanting to make their desired changes. Accurately hearing and responding to that resistance requires that the emotion associated with the resistance be understood and given a response.

## **Resistance as a Natural and Emotional Response to Change**

Resistance is a natural and emotional response to change; a response every client who comes for counselling experiences. The counsellor can see resistance, not as an enemy to reckon with but as a force of energy to make friends with, to learn from, and as Milton Erikson saw it, as the leverage to initiate change.

William Bridges (1980; 1993) describes simply and precisely the emotional turmoil and resistance

that accompany change. In my experience, both clients and counselling students have found Bridge's metaphorical descriptions to be profoundly relevant and helpful in understanding and accepting the inner emotional turmoil which accompanies change, and hence a help in understanding and respecting resistance to change. The three phases include an ending, a neutral zone, and a beginning.

## **Endings/Letting go of the Old**

This stage involves the emotional task of leaving the old ways -- behaviours, thoughts, feelings, and self-identity -- behind to reach new and desired changes. There is inevitably resistance, until a person makes an ending and leaves the old behind. An old life, an old way of being, an old identity has to end before a new one can begin.

## **The Neutral Zone**

This is frequently experienced as confusion, turmoil and much denied emotion. The neutral zone is an unfamiliar stretch of wilderness before our desired changes have been achieved. It is a time when necessary reorientation and redefinition is taking place.

## **New Beginnings**

This third stage of transition is the new energy and new sense of direction which follows naturally

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from travelling through the emotional wilderness of the transition process. The client is ready for change.

## **Working with the Emotional Experience of Resistance**

In order to understand and work effectively with the emotional experience of resistance, a counsellor can benefit tremendously from Safran and Greenberg's (1992) work on the role of emotion in therapeutic change. They define three categories of emotional expression: primary, secondary (or reactive) and instrumental emotions. Primary emotions are those which experiential therapies refer to as "authentic feelings". Only primary feelings lead to change. Primary emotions seem to possess sensory and bodily felt components. The person doesn't doubt the truth of these feelings. The feeling is real and is being experienced in the moment.

Secondary emotions are expressed in reaction to a more primary emotion or cognition. For example, a person may express anger when they are really afraid, or a person may express fear in reaction to a belief that they are inadequate.

Instrumental emotions are emotional behaviour patterns that people have learned to use to influence or manipulate others. Examples are

anger expressed in a blaming or intimidating manner to control another person, or sadness expressed to get attention.

Barriers to change become the springboards to change, when a counsellor works with clients' primary emotions. Getting in touch, even momentarily, with these previously denied underlying emotions is itself a therapeutic change event. The feelings emerge in the present, are felt deeply at the moment and provide an irrevocable shift in one's view of self and the world (Greenberg & Safran, 1987).

## **Facilitating Primary Emotion**

Counsellors must distinguish between emotional expression which is an agent of change and client empowerment, and emotional expression which perpetuates an avoidance of change. Following is a list of ways to facilitate clients' expression and experience of primary emotions.

1. Respond to what is most poignant in the client's message (Martin, 1983). Ask yourself, "What is the client communicating in his/her unwillingness to change?" Use empathy to communicate an understanding of the client's core message, particularly the emotional content. Be tentative in responding to your hunches of what is implicit in the client's message, to allow the client the freedom to confirm or

deny the accuracy of this response. This facilitates identification of the primary feeling underneath the reactive, secondary or instrumental emotions.

2. Always attend to clients' non-verbal indications of whether they are experiencing their primary emotions or whether they are simply talking about emotions.
3. Respond to missed messages with empathy, validating the experience of both sides of the conflict. This helps identify and work with conflicting primary emotions.
4. Respond with present tense immediacy and relationship immediacy (Egan, 1994). Be free to express to the client, when appropriate, self-involving statements of what you experience is standing in the way of working together.
5. Use directives such as focusing (assessing a bodily felt sense of the problem) to identify the emotion and to discover emotional shifts and the guidance which comes from the body's wisdom (McMahon, 1993).
6. Use Gestalt techniques of "here and now experiencing", "staying with feeling", "empty chair" and engaging two conflicting parts of one self in a dialogue (Ivey, Ivey & Simek-Downing, 1987).
7. Explore the client's desired or preferred scenario (Egan, 1994) to elicit the imagined future (Gelatt, 1992) as well as the pri-

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mary emotions associated with the strengths in that image. Use the solution-focused miracle question - "If anything were possible, or if a miracle happened over night, how would your situation be different?" (Wiener-Davis, 1990). There is an empowering release of affirming primary emotion in the process of imagining the desired future, as if it were already true.

8. It is also important for counsellors to include in their repertoire, alternatives to traditional talk-therapy such as therapeutic game playing, story telling and role playing, particularly in responding to what may appear to be resistance when counselling children (Allan, 1988; Kottman, 1990; Landreth, 1991). These are additional ways to honor the fact that clients who appear to be resistant to speak about their experiences are not trying to be difficult, but are primarily needing to be understood, (Kottler, 1992) before they can move ahead in the change process.

## Conclusion

The two frameworks I have presented form a gestalt: In the background stands transition theory - that is, what we know to be true about the emotional turmoil that accompanies change. In the foreground is the client or client system and the counsellor's task of hearing and responding to the primary emo-

tions of the client. This model reframes resistance as a cue that there are emotional resources to be tapped into: the experience and expression of primary emotion empowers the client to change. I have listed a number of humanistic, experiential therapy approaches to facilitate working with primary emotions, as a means to work collaboratively with seemingly difficult or resistant clients.

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