Chapter 9

Enhancing the Helper–Helpee Therapeutic Relationship and the Client’s Desirable Change in Online Counselling

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ABSTRACT

The ultimate aim of counselling is to assist the individual identify his problems, recognize the solution options that are available, and to apply such solution to the problems in order to become a functional person to himself and the society at large. Going by the accelerated growth of technology worldwide, the counselling process, like other professions, has gone beyond one-on-one method (traditional method) to an online system; with this comes the fear that the same strategies might not be effective in achieving the same counselling goals. Therefore, this chapter examines some of those counselling strategies that can enhance effective therapeutic relationship between the counsellor and the client thereby bringing about clienteles’ desirable change. The basic ingredients that could bring about successful one-on-one counselling process such as structuring, empathy, and other counsellor’s characteristics are also found as appropriate procedures in online counselling option. Further, self-disclosure strategy between counsellor and counsellee especially at early stage whereby the counsellor reveals his/her level of expertise and status before the counselling contract would increase the commitment level of the client and able to surmount his challenges early.

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INTRODUCTION

A therapeutic relationship, according to Goldstein and Higginbotham (1999), refers to feelings of liking, respecting, and trusting by a helpee (i.e. client) towards the helper (i.e. the counsellor) in whom assistance is sought, combined also with similar feelings of liking, respecting, and trusting from the helper towards the helpee. It is obviously a two-way relationship. Virtually all scientific approaches to Counselling and Psychotherapy stress the relevance of helper-helpee therapeutic relationship for enhanced desirable change in the helpee. Therefore, the better this relationship is, the less defensive (i.e. the more open) the helpee is about his or her feelings. Further, there is a greater probability that the helpee will explore these feelings more deeply with the helper, and it is more likely that the helpee will accept and act upon the advice provided by the helper. This viewpoint has found support in other fields. For instance, the effectiveness of medication has been shown to be partly a factor of the relationship between the drug giver and the drug receiver (or user); learning in school has also been shown to be influenced in part by the existing teacher-pupil relationship. The inference from all these is that in any helper-helpee interaction, the quality of such relationship can serve as a potent influence on communication, openness, persuade-ability, and positive change in the helpee (Goldstein & Higginbotham, 1999).

Online counselling simply means counseling via electronics with the use of Internet, cell phone, and other devices. This involves helpers creating websites on the World Wide Web (www), where helpees submit questions via e-mail to the helper’s website, and the helper responds to the helpee’s questions as soon as possible. Online counseling is also called cybercounselling (Hannon, 1996; Wiggins-Frame, 1998; Nystul, 1999). Goldstein (1971) in Goldstein and Higginbotham (1999) submitted that laboratory research has developed several procedures that can be used to successfully increase attraction of the experimenter’s subjects to their experimenter. He identified some procedures for enhancing the helper-helpee relationship, especially the helpee’s liking of the helper. From these, two are striking and relevant to enhancing the client-counsellor relationship in online counselling. These are structuring and helper characteristics.

PROCEDURES FOR ENHANCING HELPER-HELPEE RELATIONSHIP IN ONLINE COUNSELLING

Structuring

Structuring involves designing strategies by a third party to mould client’s expectations and feelings about his or her intended relationship with the counsellor he or she is consulting with. It involves describing the role and functions of the counsellor and client, and thus provides a rationale for what the counsellor is doing in counselling. Structuring assists clients to be receptive to counselling and hence, understand what is going on in the counselling process. This in turn increases their motivation toward counselling and as well enables them to take an active role in the counselling process (Goldstein & Higginbotham, 1999; Nystul, 1999). Structuring, according to Goldstein and Higginbotham could be divided into types, according to how it is designed. These are direct structuring, trait structuring, and role expectancy structuring. In direct structuring, the client is informed by a third party earlier in time that he or she will like the counsellor when meeting him or her even though they have never met before; while in trait structuring, the client is similarly told ahead of time certain positive characteristics of the helper that he or she is meeting with by a third party. In role expectancy structuring, however, the helpee has been assisted ahead of time to clarify what