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Helpful Strategies for Teaching Effective Confrontation Skills

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Confrontation is one of the basic counseling interventions counselors use to promote the wellness of the client. According to MacCluskie (2010), effective confrontation promotes insight and awareness, reduces resistance, increases congruence between the client's goals and their behaviors, promotes open communication, and leads to positive changes in people's emotions, thoughts and actions. Despite the benefits and necessity of confrontation, the term can invoke negative emotions for many people, especially counseling students in training. As a result, much of the literature has begun to refer to the skill of confronting as *challenging* or even *caring confrontation* (Lankford, 2004; Seligman, 2004; Young, 2009). It can be difficult for students to fully comprehend or grasp the significance and need for effective confrontation due to their own negative experiences of being criticized and confronted and the negative feelings confrontation stirs up (Lankford, 2004). These may contribute to a student's fear of being criticized themselves, offending, fear of being wrong, fear of failing, or making a mistake. Similarly, student's poor confrontation skills may also be attributed to the inability to clearly and accurately conceptualize the client's underlying issue, which keeps them from actively using confrontation.

Leaman (1978) defined confrontation as "a direct technique in which the counselor challenges clients to face themselves realistically." This view of confrontation as an assertive counselor directed technique that is used to force the client to look at their lives in an accurate and honest manner persisted for several years (Sinick, 1977). In time, the definition moved away from the perception of being a harsh counselor led revelation of the client's reality to focusing on identifying and pointing out inconsistencies and discrepancies that the client may not recognize in themselves (Harrow, 1995; Ivey, Gluckstern, & Ivey, 1997). Young (2009) elaborated that "Confrontations are interventions that point out discrepancies in client beliefs, behaviors, words, or nonverbal messages" (p. 194), while MacCluskie (2010) defined confrontation as consisting of "making an observation or otherwise bringing to a client's attention discrepancies that are apparent to the counselor in the client's behavior, feelings, or perception" (p. 162). It is this view of observing inconsistencies and reflecting discrepancies in the client's

behavior that is apparent in the current literature (Ivey, Ivey, Zalaquett, & Quirk, 2012; MacCluskie, 2010; Young, 2009).

According to Young (2009), there are six types of discrepancies that are commonly observed of clients. The first is a discrepancy between a client's verbal and nonverbal message. This happens when a client verbally says one thing but their nonverbal facial expressions or body language implies otherwise. The second is incongruence between the client's personal beliefs and their own experiences. For example, when a client states a particular belief about themselves, whether it is positive or negative, but their actual life experiences contradict that belief. The third discrepancy consists of incongruence between the client's personal value system and their outward behaviors. Fourth, discrepancies may exist when there is incongruence between what the client says and how the client chooses to behave. The fifth discrepancy occurs when the client demonstrates incongruence between their earlier life experiences and their future plans. For example, despite having bad experiences in the past, the client plans to make similar choices that will lead to the same negative experiences. Finally, the sixth discrepancy is incongruence when the client states one thing and then makes another statement that is either contradictory or inconsistent with the first statement. These six forms of discrepancy create conflict for the client and demonstrate possible difficulty for the client. The way these discrepancies are recognized and addressed can vary depending upon which theoretical lens is applied.

It is important to point out that nearly all the theories incorporate or address confrontation in one manner or another. Confrontation may be used to connect more deeply with the client, direct the client to address specific work, or even focus on collaborating together to address a problem depending on the counselor's theoretical orientation (Strong & Zeman, 2010). Most counseling theories can be connected to one of the five reasons counselors use confrontation as described by Seligman (2004). The first reason to use confrontation, according to Seligman, is to promote insight and awareness. These two humanistic concepts are consistent with existential and Gestalt theories, as well as psychoanalytic theory. According to Fall, Holden, and Marquis (2010), "an existential counselor's goal is to facilitate a client to gain awareness and take responsibility for courageously confronting the givens or existence" and can be seen as a part of the "authentic relationship" (p.155). They also described the role of the Gestalt therapist as "...supportive and confrontational, continuously working to encourage here-and-now awareness in the client" (p. 214). Fritz Perls is known for confronting clients on their incongruities in their nonverbal and verbal behavior (Young, 2009).

The second reason to use confrontation in counseling is to reduce resistance. Although resistant behavior may be addressed be many different theories, psychoanalytic theory emphasizes and regularly focuses on confronting client resistance to anything that may help to achieve insight, which is also the first reason to confront (Patton & Meara, 1992). Increasing congruence between the clients' goals and their behaviors is the third reason to use confrontation. The goal of improving congruence is synonymous with person centered theory. The core conditions for establishing a trusting relationship, genuine empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness and congruence, enable the client to identify their own incongruencies (Cormier & Hackney, 2012; Fall et al., 2010).

The postmodern constructivist approaches of solution focused and narrative therapy appear to support the fourth reason to confront; to promote open communication. According to Fall, Holden and Marquis, the constructivist approaches gently confront by setting the stage for possible change as counselors "…listen and question in particular ways that help clients expose and evaluate perspectives and practices that the client has taken for granted and that draw out, identify, and amplify clients' preferred directions, their strengths, and exceptions to problems…" (p. 362).

Lastly, the cognitive and behavioral change oriented theories tend to align with the fifth reason; that confrontation leads to positive changes in people's emotions, thoughts, and actions. This is supported by Adlerian theory, which addresses unhealthy functioning, such as safeguarding and mistaken beliefs (Fallet al., 2010). Young (2009) stated that "Albert Ellis… shows clients the gap between their beliefs and rationality by directly exposing them to the 'nuttiness' of their ideas and frequently uses curse words to create emotional impact" (p. 194). For cognitive behavioral theory, the counselor addresses a client's cognitive distortions by using disputation strategies that help the client recognize and challenge dysfunctional thinking (Fall et al., 2010).

Combs (as cited in Snowman & Biehler, 2003) identified six characteristics of a good teacher: 1. they are well informed about their subject; 2. they are sensitive to the feelings of students and colleagues; 3. they believe the students can learn; 4. they have a positive self-concept; 5. they believe in helping all students do their best; and 6. they use many different methods of instruction. Based on the counseling literature and clinical experience, this approach by Combs can be applied to teaching counseling and specifically to teaching effective confrontation skills from a humanistic approach.

1. Good teachers need to be well trained and experienced in clinical skills. The professional counseling standards outline specifically that doctoral students in accredited counselor education training programs should have knowledge of instructional theories and methods and demonstrate their own personal teaching philosophy of teaching and learning. They are also required to know major counseling theories and be able to demonstrate their own personal theoretical orientation as well as be able to demonstrate effective application of multiple counseling theories. In addition, they are required to demonstrate an understanding of case conceptualization and effective interventions across diverse populations and settings (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009).

Teaching the basics of confrontation can be done through prepared readings and through classroom lectures and should build upon the basic relationship building skills as well as conceptualization skills (Ivey et al., 1997). Students were better able to learn effective confrontation skills when they were better able to understand the strength of the client relationship and were able to conceptualize the client's issues clearly (Beck & Yager, 1982). It is important to provide students with an accurate definition of confrontation. As mentioned earlier, many students have had negative experiences with confrontation and are very hesitant to adopt confrontation into their skill set (Lankford, 2004). Using a definition that focuses on identifying individual discrepancies and inconsistencies within the client's worldview can be helpful (MacCluskie, 2010). It will also be important to outline the purposes of confrontation as Seligman (2004) has outlined, followed by a step by step process described by several authors.

2. Good teachers are sensitive to the feelings of students and colleagues. According to Carl Rogers, one of the components of the core condition for establishing a meaningful relationship is empathy (Cormier & Hackney, 2012). According to Gladding (2011), empathy is "the counselor's ability to see, be aware of, conceptualize, understand, and effectively communicate back to a client the client's feelings, thoughts, and frame of reference in regard to a situation or point of view" (p. 56). This is a critical step in being able to teach effective confrontation skills. As counselor educators, it is important to model the very behaviors that form the foundation of counseling. Instructors must first be able to empathize with their students by understanding the fear and concern they have with confrontation (Lankford, 2004).

3. Believe that students can learn. Instructors must be able to demonstrate unconditional positive regard for the students, which means an acceptance of them as fellow human beings and a belief in their ability to acquire these skills, without casting judgment. Through instructor empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence and genuineness, students will be able to trust that the instructor is committed to this process and believe that they will be able to help them learn effective confrontation skills.

4. Good teachers have a positive self-concept. Another component of the core condition for establishing a relationship is congruence and genuineness. This requires the instructor to be aware of their own issues, and personal struggles, as well as their own abilities to teach effectively and to counsel effectively. According to the 2005 American Counseling Association *Code of Ethics*, counselors must be without impairment.

5. Good teachers believe in helping all students do their best. As the instructor/student relationship begins to emerge, the instructor needs to turn that trusting relationship into an actual working alliance. Gladding (2011) defined working alliance as "An agreement between a counselor and a client on the goals and tasks on which they will focus. They form an emotional bond in this mutual act of counseling" (p. 164). This is where the students and the instructor have committed to working to and learning the basic counseling skills, and in this instance, specifically being able to commit to working toward learning effective confrontation.

6. Use many different methods of instruction. For teaching effective confrontation skills, it is important to provide meaningful examples, experiential practice, video critique, and analysis and accurate feedback. Examples are effective tools to assist with learning (Ivey et al., 1997). Instructors may choose to use video demonstrations of counseling skills, provide a live demonstration of them using confrontation, or may demonstrate effective confrontation as well as the need for counselors to confront through personal experience or anecdote. It is helpful for students to see actual examples of what confrontation looks like (Leaman, 1978). Experiential practice is also a very important part of teaching effective confrontation skills. Students learn through doing and applying the skills they have learned in class. This helps to avoid any gap between the theory of counseling and actually practicing it (Ronnestad & Skovholt (1993). Realistic practice in the classroom under the instructor's supervision can provide the students with a good opportunity to learn effective confrontation skills (Beck & Yager, 1982; Ivey et al., 1997). Another useful teaching method that can be employed in teaching confrontation skills is video recording. Having students video record their practice sessions and review them helps with their conceptualization skills and the ability to recognize areas for improvement. Lastly, it is important for students to receive feedback/supervision

(Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Feedback can be given in written form; after the instructor has watched a video taped session or they can give live supervision/ feedback.

In summary, students' own negative experiences of being criticized and confronted and the negative feelings associated with confrontation can make it difficult for students to develop effective confrontation skills (Lankford, 2004). Instructors will be better able to teach effective counseling skills by understanding how confrontation relates to multiple counseling theories as well as their own personal theoretical orientation practice of confrontation. They will also be better able to teach confrontation by demonstrating empathy, unconditional positive regard for their students, and by demonstrating their own congruence and genuineness. Lastly, by using a variety of experiential learning activities, counseling instructors will be able give students the opportunity to learn effective counseling skills.

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