



COALITION FOR WORK WITH PSYCHOTRAUMA AND PEACE KOALICIJA ZA RAD SA PSIHOTRAUMOM I MIR

AN OUTLINE OF THE CLIENT-CENTERED CONVERSATION

ALSO KNOWN AS THE THERAPEUTIC CONVERSATION

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VERSION 2019 06 07

PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document is meant to give a short outline of the client-centered conversation, as used by the CWWPP and others.

A more complete description of this methodology will be given in our Pragmatic Empowerment Training course on communication. That course should be online by the end of 2019.

Also, a separate document including the types of information required for a good history of trauma, particularly for migrants, is in preparation.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CLIENT-CENTERED CONVERSATION

The client-centered conversation has a number of goals:

- to obtain the maximum amount of accurate information from a client;
- to create trust between the client and the facilitator of the conversation;
- under some circumstances, to provide the beginning of therapy for the client.

The method described here is meant as a backbone to your own method. Each facilitator will develop his or her own precise methodology in the course of experience.

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SUMMARY OF PHASES

The human mind works such that we need a beginning, a middle, and an end. Thus, it is important to structure the conversation in that way.

- Introduction
- Open, or Client-Centered Phase
- Closed, or Facilitator-Centered Phase
- Alternation Between Phases
- Agreement Phase
- Evaluation Phase
- Closing

Another important point here is not only to deal with facts but to deal with emotions and feelings. This can be extremely important for the client, not only in therapeutic situations. Working with feelings will gain trust which, also, will lead to the client giving more factual information. In this context, please also see the first Pragmatic Empowerment Training (PET) course on the client-facilitator relationship, available on www.cwwpp.org.

THE INTRODUCTION PHASE

In this phase, the facilitator explains who s/he is, what the purpose of the conversation is, what techniques will be used during the session, how long the conversation will last, and, extremely importantly, who will see the report of the conversation. This privacy is essential. In general, international ethics require that the client gives written permission for all use of the information obtained in the conversation. At the end of this phase, it is important to ask if the client has questions about the process and anything else and, obviously, to answer them.

THE OPEN, OR CLIENT-CENTERED PHASE

In this phase, the facilitator asks open questions and attempts to get the client to explain as much as possible about the issues at hand. An open question is one that allows the client to tell a story and to expand on it. The facilitator intervenes as little as possible. Thus, the facilitator will ask questions such as, "How can I assist you today?", "What's on your mind?", "Can you tell me about your journey?", etc. The facilitator intervenes as little as possible and lets the client speak. Even if the client pauses, the facilitator allows the pauses to continue. Frequently, the pause is to allow the client to think and get strength for what s/he will say next. Further, the facilitator encourages the client to go on, through phrases such as, "Can you tell me more about that?". At appropriate intervals, the facilitator repeats back to the client a summary of what s/he has said in a phrase such as, "If I understood you correctly, you told me that ...". This tells the client that the facilitator is listening and is interested. It also encourages the client to speak further.

One aim of this open phase is to find out what the issues really are. That the facilitator listens also shows the client that the facilitator is interested in him/her and in the situation.

Although this seems like the easiest phase in some way, many people have difficulty with it. It takes practice to do it well.

THE CLOSED, OR FACILITATOR-CENTERED PHASE

In this phase, the facilitator obtains the concrete information needed. Closed questions, that is, questions that have a concrete answer, are used. Examples are, “What is your date of birth?”, “When did you come to this city?”, “What passport do you have?”, etc. We will explore questions that are relevant to traumatized people, particularly migrants, in another document.

ALTERNATION BETWEEN THE CLIENT-CENTERED PHASE AND THE FACILITATOR-CENTERED PHASE AND HALF-OPEN QUESTIONS

Especially during the closed phase, issues may come up that require an additional open phase. Thus, the facilitator may want to ask a “half-open” question that will evoke more closed questions, and vice versa. Each of these sub-phases should be explored. An example. “You told me that you were beaten by the police. Can you tell me more about that?”. Thus, the facilitator will want to alternate between open and closed phases, especially with complex situations.

THE AGREEMENT PHASE

In this phase, the facilitator and the client agree on the following actions. This may be as simple as making an appointment for the following week. It may involve a number of exercises or “homework” to be done by either the facilitator or the client or both. We stress that both the facilitator and the client must agree on any course of action. Sometimes, they don’t, and this can be problematic. As one example, I, as a doctor, don’t like prescribing antibiotics for a simple cold. Some clients demand that I do it. Thus, another solution must be found that satisfies both of us. This is the case for many situations.

THE EVALUATION PHASE

Once the meeting is finished, the facilitator should summarize what was done during the session and ask the client how it was and how s/he is feeling about the session and how s/he is feeling in general. This has a number of effects. It can be perfunctory, and the client may simply say that it was “all right”. However, it may give the facilitator valuable insights into what the client is thinking. It also empowers the client, at least to a small extent, to say what s/he is thinking and to have at least a small amount of control over the situation.

THE CLOSING PHASE

As mentioned at the beginning of this document, we, as human beings, need to have a “story”, that is, a beginning, a middle, and an end. A story without an end is unsatisfying. I have been to a number of conferences and had other sessions where the facilitators haven’t given that, and it leaves something unsettled, sometimes very much so. The conclusion should summarize what was done during the session and what was agreed during the agreement phase. It then should include a “goodbye” of some sort.

CONCLUSIONS AND EPILOGUE

As mentioned, this document is a brief outline and is meant as a backbone to what you will do. You will, no doubt, develop your own style.

This material will be dealt with in much more detail in the Pragmatic Empowerment Training (PET) course on communication, once that is finished. We will announce that on our Facebook page.

We also are writing a brief outline of the questions to ask migrants and other clients as a history. We will send that as soon as it's available.