

Do Counsellors Need Specialised Training to Work with 'Challenging' Clients?

Presentation by Hugh Crago on 3 May 2016: reviewed by Juliana Triml

Many years ago I had a conversation with Prof. Jeffrey Kottler and the term "difficult client" came up. He clearly stated that there is no such a client that is difficult, (or now the term "challenging" is adopted) but it is the therapist who is challenged due to lack of skills. There is a book by the academic/ writer J. Kottler, bearing the same title.

Well, Hugh Crago made his presentation quite experiential and challenged those present to self-assess the quality or adequacy of their basic training. The aim of this exercise was to assess training, attitudes and skills that are needed to offer therapists a better chance with helping those clients who face many challenges in their lives, and who may be seen as challenging for the therapist. After all, that is the main reason they search therapy.

For this purpose, Hugh asked attendees to join one of two groups:

a/ Persons who believe they had a good basic training, ie theory and experiential mix v. those who did not.

b/ Persons who had more than one basic training

Then we split into small groups and talked about what we learned initially and what we learned since then and through which channels.

Hugh, being an academic lecturing counselling, found that many curricula attempt to teach too many theories on account of practical skills of listening, reflecting and having an honest talk with the client that develop a trusting and interactive working relationship with the client. These basic skills are not allocated enough time for trainees to become comfortable with this style. In some institutions, due to the costs incurred by students, it is not permitted to fail a student or to offer a repeat course (as some attendees testified).

Hugs noted that theory often makes a much better sense only once experiential work is adequate. But, unfortunately, theory is taught before experiential practice.

I very much agree with this comment, as when I finished Psychology degree and Grad Dip., I was asking myself "what can I do with all the knowledge to help anyone with their issues?" It was only later when I was practicing and put aside some of the theories and just connected with the humaneness that we share with clients, I could see some positive outcomes. At that point, of course, it is useful to enlarge our therapeutic repertoire and do more research on regular basis and to learn new skills.

I believe that Hugh's presentation challenged many of us and motivated us to explore "what type of therapist do I want to be?"