



What is Co-Counselling?

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WHAT IS CO-COUNSELLING?

by JanPieter Hoogma

Living happily with your feelings

If only that could be possible! One of the difficulties you may have in accepting yourself is in dealing with your feelings, especially when they are strong emotions, such as rage, despair, shame, grief, guilt or anger. People are anxious to keep such emotions under control, because failing to do so feels humiliating and unpleasant. 'What will other people think of me?' , 'This is not me.' 'People will discover who I really am'. For all these reasons people will generally try to hide most of their feelings. However in situations such as having lost a loved one, or dealing with stressful relationships or work that is too demanding, this control of feelings can collapse and the emotions burst out. People fear this breakdown of control.

However, when you are in an environment where you feel safe, valued and cared for (physically and emotionally), sooner or later you will feel free to express yourself emotionally. When this happens, you will find that you feel better and a lot clearer while getting in better touch with your own inner truth. There is nothing new or startling about this. When young children who haven't yet learnt to hold in their feelings are allowed to cry or yell until they have fully expressed their hurt or anger, they are then able to go off and play quite happily. This release or catharsis is known in Co-Counselling as "discharge", and it has positive and beneficial effects, such as a feeling of relief, having more clarity and experiencing more zest for life.

Very painful emotions cannot and do not need to be discharged all at once. To avoid getting drowned in them and losing control, you, as client, learn to choose at what depth and at what pace you want to deal with your emotions. You also learn "to be kind to yourself" as part of this process, so that unpleasant feelings such as guilt and shame can be comfortably dealt with.

Empowerment

Co-Counselling does much more than help to mop up distress, by allowing you to search for and confront its root causes. The principle is simple: past painful experiences have conditioned us to respond in set ways ("patterns", in Co-Counselling terms), and these old hurts still influence our

present behaviour. Such patterns restrict our choices when we meet new situations, and prevent us from feeling free to act in the most appropriate or creative way. Patterns can be responsible for our difficulties in dealing with current problems, particularly those where we cannot easily understand the reason for the difficulty. We can all gain access to more of our potential by exploring and then releasing the suppressed feelings that make us behave in patterned ways.

Inevitably, releasing suppressed feelings involves coming into contact with them again. However, Co-Counselling is not about digging up old memories for the sake of it: rather, in order to relegate them to the dustbin of history, it is necessary first to regain access to them.

Another way of preventing future distress is changing negative basic beliefs about yourself. For instance, if you believe that you are unlovable, you can discharge your distress about feeling unloved again and again, without any change in the underlying feeling or belief. Changing this basic belief into a more positive one such as 'I am loveable reduces distress in the long term, and creates more love.

How does it work?

In Co-Counselling people usually work in pairs taking equal time to be "counsellor" and "client" in turn. This exchange is called 'having a session'. You can have a session with any Co-Counsellor at any time that suits both of you. A session can last an hour each way, or five minutes. You can have them anywhere: up a mountain, in a room, in your home, over the telephone. This distinguishes it from other types of counselling and therapy. Another difference is that you as the client are in charge of your part of the session, while the counsellor is there for support. Then you swap roles. Thus Co-Counselling is firstly a training in being a client. The more you understand how it is to be a client yourself, the better you will intuit how you, in the counsellor role, can provide good support for your client.

Co-Counselling allows you to meet other Co-Counsellors in the Scottish and international network of people who have satisfactorily completed the "Fundamentals" training course. In the network everybody is free to choose their level of involvement in the sessions, groups or workshops on offer.

In your local area you can create your own personal support network by finding out whom you like to have sessions with - face to face or over the telephone - and whom you would like to join in support groups.

How do I learn?

The basic training is a 40-hour course in the Fundamentals of Co-Counselling. Usually these courses run over three weekends or 9 weekdays.

The learning group consists of a maximum of eight people plus either two teachers or one teacher

with the support of an experienced Co-Counsellor. These small groups enable intensive, experiential learning with plenty of attention for each individual.

The course starts by setting up a safe and supportive environment. Safety in the group and in the Co-Counselling sessions is guaranteed by confidentiality. Your feelings, your truth and the way in which you express yourself are important and will be treated confidentially.

To support your learning you will receive hand-outs and a Co-Counselling manual during the Fundamentals.

What will I learn?

In the Fundamentals you learn both client and counsellor roles. No two courses will be exactly the same, but they are similar enough to allow you to work with any other trained Co-Counsellor anywhere in the world.

Learning Co-Counselling is first about learning how to be a "client", how to get most out of your client time. As a client, you learn how to work with your feelings rather than discussing or suppressing them. You discover how to release feelings that you have held in from past experiences, so that you can come to terms with them.

You also learn how to break through set behaviour patterns and to respond creatively to challenging situations. You will learn how to discard old and worn out "shoulds" and "oughts". Behaviour patterns and basic beliefs that block your well being are explored, often on the basis of current or immediate issues rather than digging for "deep" material.

As counsellor you learn how to be present for your client by giving full attention and safe support, while respecting the client's sense of self direction. You may only be required to listen in a focused and non-judgmental way.

Another part of the counsellor job can be to offer suggestions ("interventions") to your client. These 'interventions' function mainly as reminders or encouragement focused on ways of working with which the client is already familiar. Your experience as client helps here: the better you understand how counselling skills and techniques work for you as client, the better you are able to give suggestions to your client as counsellor.

In the outside world it is quite common for one person to try to control the behaviour of another. To prevent controlling patterns from slipping into the client-counsellor relationship, the counsellor's role in Co-Counselling is generally restricted to making neutral interventions. In addition, the nature of control patterns, how they work, and how to avoid them, is taught during the Fundamentals.

To provide Co-Counsellors with the opportunity to have quick access to sessions, an introduction

to Telephone Co-Counselling is part of the Fundamentals.

Who is it for?

Co-Counselling is a powerful tool for personal growth. It is effective for most people.

It's for you, if:

- you want to make changes in your life to realise your potential, increase your life skills with the support of other people
- you are willing to "open up" and to explore what is going on inside you
- you want to have access to a support network.

You may not be ready for Co-Counselling if:

- you are unable to give your undivided attention to another person, for example because you need a lot of attention yourself
- you need alcohol or mind-affecting medicines to the extent that you are not able to attend workshops and sessions sober and free of drugs
- you are only prepared to observe other people but not willing to open up and participate fully in the learning process.

If you do not yet feel ready for Co-Counselling, you have the alternative of having one-way sessions with an experienced Co-Counselling teacher. Most of this counselling will be based on Co-Counselling theory, so that you get used to what is involved in Co-Counselling.

Will it train me to be a counsellor?

Because in Co-Counselling the client is in charge of his or her own sessions, Co-Counselling does not train you to take responsibility as counsellor for another person. This contrasts with one-way counselling or therapy in which the client is generally not assumed to have client skills or to be in charge of the session. That is why Co-Counselling does not offer any formal qualifications or credentials for your ability as a counsellor.

However, Co-Counselling can give you useful expertise and enable you to be a better one-way counsellor. Your listening skills will be enhanced and you will have a clearer and more sympathetic understanding of other people's behaviour in everyday life.

In addition, Co-Counselling offers valuable support for people whose work involves dealing with people, for example as counsellor, manager, leader or teacher. It provides an opportunity to off load distress and to explore issues such as "Why did I do that?", "What does this event tell me about myself?", "Why do I feel inadequate when...?" or "Why do I dislike doing X and how can I deal with it better?".

After the Core Training

When you have completed the 'Fundamentals' training course, you will already know several Co-Counsellors, and have had sessions with them. You can arrange further sessions, either one-to-one or in small groups, with this group of people, or you can seek out others. An excellent way of doing this is to join a local Co-Counselling network. You will then receive a Newsletter, which contains information about workshops and articles about Co-Counselling. It contains also an address list of Co-Counsellors and often a section listing Co-Counsellors who are prepared to have telephone sessions if they have time available.

You can attend Open Co-Counselling Days, which are full- or half-day workshop where Co-Counsellors come together to have sessions either in pairs or in small groups. These occasions offer opportunities to meet other Co-Counsellors and to potentially find a more permanent Co-Counselling partner.

You may want to attend Further Skills Workshops, taught by experienced Co-Counsellors or Co-Counselling teachers. Some of them focus on developing more Co-Counselling skills as such, like 'Working on an Issue that feels too big'. Some are related to specific themes such as 'Inner child work', 'Sexuality and Tantra', 'Assertiveness', 'Loss & Bereavement'.

Residential Workshops have flexible programs offered by participants. There also are support groups, celebrations and discharge, good food, walking in the countryside, dancing and singing, and so on. Residential workshops usually have organised child minding with paid crèche workers. You will also have the opportunity to attend other UK and International Co-Counselling workshops.

After having built up more confidence in your client and counselling skills you may want to start a support group or join an existing one.

How much does it cost?

Co-Counselling sessions are free, because you exchange your time and skills with another Co-Counsellor.

The fees for Scottish workshops are related generally to income levels, although there are exceptions. The levels are: normal income, low income and no income (student or unwaged). If the lowest fee level is still too much for you, you may negotiate another solution, such as paying by installment.

Fundamentals fees generally vary from £100 - £200, depending on income. After the Fundamentals you usually will receive one copy of the local newsletter free.

Subscription to the Scottish network newsletter is between £5 and £12 a year, depending on your income. (4 issues a year).

Peer Workshops such as Community Days & CCI residential workshops usually have fees that cover the organisational costs only. For Open Co-Counselling Days the fees depend also on the region where they are organised. In Edinburgh and Tayside this is £1 or £2 for the whole day, again depending on your income.

Further Skills Workshops have fees that cover the facilitation and teaching on top of the organisational costs. Typical costs vary between £40 and £80 for 8 evenings.

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