



What is Co-Counselling?

D. Colbourne, “**What is Co-Counselling?**”, *One to One*, 1996.

Co-Counselling is a system of self-discovery and personal growth, a training in emotional competence. It's for people who have some creative energy available to work on themselves, and gives them a way to realise their aims. We can all express more of our potential, shed unnecessary stress and live more creatively, assertively and lovingly. We do this by accepting and valuing ourselves and others, whilst expressing our feelings and healing the hurts which we have been conditioned over the years to suppress.

The basic idea (shared by many humanistic approaches) is that if I am given time and compassionate attention (rather than questions and advice) I will be able to explore whatever is blocking me or hurts me or prevents me realising my potential.

Co-Counselling trains me to give that sort of attention to others and to use it to work on myself, so I spend equal time in each role.

We work with whatever is "on top" - irritations from the working day, problems in relationships with friends, colleagues, family or whatever. Often we discover that we have old, set patterns or ways of responding to events which have become part of us over the years but which aren't appropriate any longer.

Old hurts and patterns are real: they can distort our present behaviour if they are unacknowledged and suppressed. We can discharge the hurts and let go of our rigidities in a way which enhances our range of options: we become more choiceful.

Talking things through with friends, partners, family or colleagues is fine, and it's the way most of us "sort ourselves out" most of the time. Co-Counselling is a way in which we can add to that support in a more focused way, in a reciprocal encounter with other similarly trained people in the network.

This practice is different from one-way counselling because no money is involved: we exchange our time in an equal relationship. There are also no hierarchies of power or authority or responsibility for anyone else's work: we are all counsellors and clients in a peer network, committed to our own growth and to supporting others in theirs. However, some specific working techniques we use are very similar to those you would find in humanistic, person-centred styles of one-way counselling. The underpinning technique, for example, is "free attention", which is at the core of Rogerian styles of one-way counselling.

One of the important features of Co-Counselling is the idea of self-direction: I don't give someone else the responsibility for my work, and when clienting in shared time with another person, I (rather than my counsellor) am in charge of the direction, rate and depth of my process.

There is a powerful effect which comes from having someone there just for you, supportively accepting and giving you "free attention", a skill which you learn on the training course. If you want, you can ask your counsellor to give you "interventions" or reminders which both of you have learned in order to make your session more productive. It's a different way of working with other people: not a social or dependent connection, but a consistent, supportive "being there" for another person without expectations or external obligations.

The relationships in the network don't replace your normal social interactions, they are an addition when you share time with someone. When you arrange to meet with other co-counsellors in a group setting or in a pair, you do so to work, not to chat, socialise or do what you do in the rest of your life. Friend relationships, because of their shared agendas and closeness, sometimes do not give us the kind of space we need to address certain issues. By avoiding an everyday type of relationship, we can create a new kind of space for each other. It has been found over many years of practice that it's the most productive way to support personal growth.

The flat networking of CCI (the Co-Counselling International) is the tradition in which this training is offered. It is committed to avoiding any kind of fixed structures, or any situation where one person has authority or speaks on anyone else's behalf. It doesn't offer a specific path to follow or a sales pitch for any social, philosophical, religious or any other form of organisation. It is not a way of making new friends, and it's not for those who need more attention than they can give.

Trying out something completely new is a bit risky. But it's one of the facts of life in personal development. You can't learn this sort of things from books - only by getting in there and doing it: it's experiential! Most people don't join a training course until they are at a point in life when it's right for them. You will probably know when you are ready to make some (often profound) changes, and when you are willing to open up to new possibilities, take some risks and make some (sometimes difficult) choices to do so.

You may not be able to benefit from Co-Counselling if you are dependent on substances (including

alcohol) which affect the mind or if you are unable to give clear caring attention to another person (for example, if you need a lot of attention yourself).

Your co-counselling teacher will usually be happy to meet you if you want to find out more and cannot manage to get to one of the information evenings. This is to give you the opportunity to see if you feel comfortable with them before you invest time and money, and to ensure that they feel OK about having you on a course. The courses may be 5-6 full days over three weekends or one evening a week for a term. They are challenging, intensive and demanding, like all the best learning experiences!

In the group, participants are responsible for their own learning. It's a training in emotional competence, in living your life to the full and supporting others who share that aim. You have the opportunity to learn:

- The practice of "free attention".
- A way of working with feelings rather than repressing them: to be a client.
- A toolkit of counsellor skills of attention, observation and interventions.
- To liberate your creativity and energy, to open up to new possibilities for growth.
- To give and receive support and nurturance.
- To contradict everyday oppressions.

Every course is different, as the participants bring their unique mix of present awareness, needs, skills and creativity. Every course does, however, give a similar grounding in the methods which enable any two people so trained to work with each other.

After the course, you choose your own way of developing your skills with others. There are local peer groups, regional, national and international workshops you can attend if you wish: the future is up to you!

People find that with practice they develop more assertiveness, self-esteem, compassion, energy and interpersonal skills. Whether or not you carry on co-counselling after the course, it will be a valuable experience which will enhance your life.

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