

Handling Complaints and Conflicts

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Abstract. CCI Co-Counselling does not have set procedures for handling complaints and conflicts. I want to demonstrate here that by taking open minded and self responsible approaches to solving difficulties that there is much potential for finding successful solutions to problems. In this article I look at this from three perspectives: (1) I have a problem: either with somebody else or they have with me. (2) Somebody tells me about a problem they have. (3) I hear about problems other people have.

It is often suggested that because we do not have formal structures and procedures within CCI for handling complaints and conflicts we should be somehow unable to handle them effectively. This is quite an oppressive message because it suggests that people do not have options for action that in fact they do have.

By not having set procedures, CCI is potentially better placed to handle problems. Organisations that have set procedures may be able to demonstrate that they can and do "do something" but there is little evidence that what they do is particularly useful. Formal complaints procedures, in particular, tend to leave both sides feeling dissatisfied and bruised. There is little evidence to suggest that the public or clients are protected by these procedures in those organisations that claim this to be their purpose. (Refs 1)

Many problems arise from the hierarchical and adversarial nature of these procedures. They encourage people to play out their patterns around authority, they become family arguments writ large.

Another major problem area for these procedures, which is also a problem for many more enlightened approaches to conflict resolution, is rigidity. Procedures are often developed from the experience of solving a particular problem. There has often been a move in CCI to develop a procedure out of a problem that we have just solved. The difficulty is that the next problem is always different. Other procedures may be based on wider experience, but then tend to focus on how problems are similar rather than how they are different. Often their authors' experiences and patterns will influence them.

I want to demonstrate here that by taking open minded and self responsible approaches to solving difficulties that there is much potential for finding successful solutions to problems. In doing this, I

will explore some of the many ways there are of approaching difficulties with other people.

Underlying principles

Two principles underlie the ideas that I outline here.

1. **Personal empowerment.**

In particular keeping ownership of problems with the person or people who are experiencing them.

This contrasts with common practice in complaint procedures where others take the whole process out of the hands of the person with the original complaint. The complainant is given no say in how the matter is handled or what sort of outcomes they would prefer. This is a form of rescuing, with people exercising control over others.

Ownership means that the person with the problem is supported to act as far as possible in their own right. Where this person seeks the help of others they retain their say in how matters are handled and what sorts of outcomes they want.

2. **Creative problem solving.**

This involves the three phases of problem analysis, solution generation and action planning. Problem analysis enables this approach to come up with ways forward that are more likely to suit the features of a particular problem. Solution generation aims to find several ways of approaching a problem. This supports an empowering approach by helping someone to have more options for action from which to choose.

This article approaches the issue from three perspectives.

1. I have a problem with what someone is doing or how they are, or someone has a problem with what I am doing. In other words, I am one of the parties directly involved.
2. You have a problem (i.e. you tell me about a problem that you are having with someone else).
3. They have a problem (i.e. I am told about a problem that is between other people).

I have a problem

Problem exploration

It is probably useful to start by considering what it is exactly about this person or what they are doing that is a problem for me (or about me that is a problem for them) and how it is a problem. It may be useful to ask other people about this - and to be prepared to hear some uncomfortable answers.

What thoughts, feelings and patterns may be underlying what is going on? This is paying attention to process. Of course, the only thing that we can know about process is that we do not know. Nevertheless, it is helpful to try to understand it as best we can.

It seems reasonable to assume that in any interaction part of what I am feeling is a normal response to what is happening and part of it is restimulation, and I can never be sure how much is which. I think that neither the position of 'None of it is my stuff .' (patterns etc.) nor 'All of it is my stuff' is helpful.

What evidence is there for a natural response? If I am feeling angry, is the other person being in some way aggressive, transgressing my boundaries or trying to control me? If I am feeling sad are they being unloving towards me, and is there any reason why this person should be loving towards me? If I am afraid, what danger is there? What could happen, what is the worst that could happen and how likely is it to happen?

It may be worth checking out the opposite as well. For instance, sometimes when someone is clearly being aggressive towards me I do not feel angry. Am I suppressing my anger? Am I afraid of it? How might this be affecting me or my behaviour? This seems often to be a factor in oppression, people are taught to be afraid of their anger so that is not then available to give them strength to resist aggression.

Returning to my part in what is happening, I often find it useful when I feel emotional in response to what someone is doing, or when I tend to react in a particular way, to consider what that is telling me about me.

Another dimension of the problem is willingness to change. If I am unwilling to change then that is a problem for me and it is potentially something I can do something about. As to the other person, I may be able to assess their willingness to change or to influence it but I cannot control it. If they are unwilling to change then that is something I can do nothing about.

I am often reminded of the serenity prayer:

Grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.

I find that this is a paradoxically empowering message. Once we give up trying to change what we cannot change, we can then focus on what we can do. We can stop trying to push at the mountain in front of us and start trying to work out how else to get to the other side, we can start thinking about the "work arounds".

Approaches to conflict within CCI often commence, sensibly, with a "counsel on it, counsel on it and counsel on it again" approach. The objective of this is, I think, both to work towards more clarity about the situation and to work towards being able to handle it in ways that are flexible, measured and effective.

Solution generation

It is always worth remembering that one possible approach may be to do nothing.

Related to doing nothing is accepting that other people are how they are, and not attempting to change this. It may be helpful to get better understand of how they are, what they are saying and what they believe. Principally, though, the aim is to find "work arounds". What are the things that I can do when I accept that the way other people are, are just part of the situations we are faced with.

Other approaches involve being assertive, being facilitative and getting help.

These involve sets of skills that are not inherently part of co-counselling. I think it is important and valuable that the only things that are inherently part of co-counselling, the only things that we all agree on, are to do with co-counselling sessions. (Refs. 2) What we do as a network or when we get together as groups of co-counsellors are the outcomes of what we have been able to learn, or not, as a result of being co-counsellors.

Other skills are needed for networking and for functioning together in groups. I do not think that these skills should be "oughts" within co-counselling and I think that the more we can acquire them the better it is for us individually and together. Over the years, I have put a considerable amount of effort into helping people to learn these skills, both directly and by incorporating them into other workshops, fundamentals etc.

Models for both assertiveness and intervention training have been developed with an underpinning of ideas from co-counselling and I find that co-counsellors can learn these skills in about a quarter of the time that it takes to train others. The assertiveness model is outlined in Ann Dickson's book "A Woman in Your Own Right" (it works for men too). (Refs. 3) One to one facilitation skills are covered in John Heron's book "Helping the Client". (Refs. 4) I recommend both books to anyone who has not already read them.

Being Assertive

Assertiveness is about clear communication to another person. This can range from a simple "No" (or "Yes") to something along the lines of "I found what you just said to me insensitive and totally inappropriate to the sort of relationship we have. In future I want you to keep your opinions about me to yourself." Note that this statement has the three elements of a full assertive statement: what is the situation, what do I want and when. It is an "I" statement and it is no longer than necessary.

Assertiveness is an inherently empowering approach in that it fundamentally involves choice. There is never just one correct way of handling a situation assertively, there is always a range of assertive possibilities. Part of learning to be more assertive involves learning about these possibilities and choosing between them for ourselves.

Paradoxically assertiveness merely communicates a piece of information about me to another person, e.g. that I would like something. It does not attempt to force anyone to do anything. Yet, it is

very effective. I think the reason for this is that other people mostly do not do what we want because they do not know what we want. When they do, people often want to co-operate.

So when we have a difficulty with what someone is doing there will be a range of assertive responses that we can make. Often these will be about asserting our own rights and boundaries.

Being facilitative

It may be that I think that what the other person is doing may not be in their own interests and that they may be open to some change. In which case I might try a facilitative approach. My aim then is to help the other person to learn something about what they are doing.

I think it is important not to confuse being assertive with being facilitative. Be clear about doing one or the other and not both together. When I am being facilitative, my aim is to be fully supportive of the other. I am not attached to any outcome other than that the other person learns. It may be that what the other person learns, for instance, is that they have been acting out of feeling sorry for me and that actually they do not want to have much to do with me. Even so, I believe that in the long run it is always in my interests for other people to be more self aware and self directed.

Facilitation involves using a wide range of interventions to help someone to learn. It can form a part of many interpersonal interactions. John Heron's model can be used to help develop skills that can enhance the whole range of relationships from friendships of all sorts through relationships in business to one way counselling or psychotherapy.

Co-counselling interventions are a sub set of interventions, but once we go beyond these interventions and beyond the client self-directed co-counselling session certain issues need to be taken into consideration. I am acting in a way that at least to some extent assumes some authority and the other person may not be aware of what I am doing. So, in addition to supporting the other person I need to consider whether I have the right to intervene in the way I am proposing and how, if I do, it will help the other person to learn.

I am referring to holistic learning here, which is not just about facts and understanding. It is also to do with feeling, the idea that if we feel differently about something we have learned something. It can be argued that all knowledge is based in

feelings and that I only know anything if I feel as if I know it.

The question of whether I have the right, or warrant, to use a particular intervention in particular circumstances can be more completely stated as: "Do I have the right to use this intervention in this situation with this person, me being how I am?" This encompasses a range of issues such as what I know, my relationship with the other person and who else is around. In particular it questions my level of skill and awareness, whether I am truly intending to be supportive of the other and am I prepared to stay with them if, for instance, they get upset. The question applies to each intervention, while it may be unwarranted for me to use some interventions it will be appropriate to use others. What may be warranted in one set of circumstances may be unwarranted in another.

If someone says to me "Stop counselling me" then it probably means that I have been unskilful, I have been using interventions, or using them in a way that is inappropriate to our relationship. On the other hand, why would I want to be any less skilful than I am able to be with people who I care about?

While this seems complex, that is no reason not to try. It is reason to keep learning from when things did not go as we hoped. In fact, we all use many interventions, mostly without thinking about it. It is a fascinating topic and well worth learning to do better.

Asking for help

I can always ask for help. An advantage of CCI not having a complaints procedure is that there is no restriction suggested as to who we can ask. If I am not feeling confident, I can ask someone who seems as if they might be. Or I can ask someone else who may not feel confident and can empathise with me and may support me better. Sometimes new co-counsellors may ask their teacher. One of the advantages of going to gatherings of co-counsellors is the opportunity to meet other people who might be able to help, including ones with particular skills. Peer or support groups can be useful, too. There are always people who we can ask.

One of the things I can ask for is sessions and these are undoubtedly potentially useful. I need to

consider whether to have sessions with people who may be giving me other forms of support. This is the same issue as having other forms of relationship with someone I co-counsel with, we will get to know something of each other's ideas and feelings and that may get in the way of us giving, or being experienced as giving, good free attention.

It may be useful for a group, or several groups, to get together to support someone in dealing with a problem. This can be useful for sharing thinking and insights.

It can also be helpful to share resources. It may be, for example, that someone's behaviour patterns are identified as being a problem for a number of people. One way of approaching this problem may be to build skills and awareness amongst these people and this may be easier if a number of people are doing it.

This is not the same as ganging up on an individual, my aim would always be for loving responses that support everyone's self-development. So the aim of this particular approach is that a person's patterned behaviour might be consistently, lovingly and firmly interrupted potentially benefiting both themselves and those who are gaining confidence in their abilities to stand up for themselves.

It is likely that people will offer leadership when groups are involved and some hierarchy will develop, as happens with many activities in CCI. I see nothing wrong with this, the hierarchy develops for a particular purpose and is voluntarily acceded to. It dissolves once the task has been accomplished and the people concerned retain no special authority.

There is a danger, though, when groups get together that they will act collusively, reinforcing each other's patterns and not seeing where they may be going wrong. Groups benefit from having devil's advocates or people with opposing points of view amongst their members.

How people I ask for help may respond is up to them, I make some suggestions in the next section. One danger, though, is that they try to take over. I need to stay clear that this is my problem and I will decide what I will do about it and what, if anything, I want others to do.

You have a problem

What can I do if someone tells me about a problem that they are having with someone else?

This is the substance of my article on Interpersonal Problem Solving (Refs. 2) and so I will summarise here.

The most important thing I can do is, I believe, to support this person in the approaches I have written about above. In other words to support them to deal with the matter themselves. I am going to be using intervention skills to do this, helping them to explore the problem and then work out ways of dealing with it.

If I am asked to give a more direct input, then the first question of me is whether I want to. What would I be achieving for myself by getting involved? On the other hand, if I do want to be involved, why? Do I have an axe of my own to grind? If so, is there an issue that I should be taking up in my own right? If there is not and should I be keeping out of it, at least until I have dealt with some of my own issues and can approach the matter reasonably objectively?

If I do agree to take a more active role then I could give support to one person in an interaction or I could facilitate or assist in the facilitation of a meeting. I could act as an intermediary, possibly

facilitating or taking part in a problem solving process involving both people. Or I could be part of a solution, e.g. conveying a message that someone does not have the confidence to convey themselves.

An important point before I get involved is that I may only have one person's perspective on a situation. Many times I have found that when I hear other people's perspectives the situation looks quite different. So, it is probably best if I am tentative until I get more information. In particular if I am or can be in some way an intermediary I would want to get the perspective of the other person involved.

I emphasise again, though, that the most important thing is that a person retains ownership of their problem. That does not mean that I will do anything that they ask me to - I am responsible for what I do and I will only do what I consider appropriate. It does mean that I will consult them and, in general, not do anything that they do not want me to do. One aspect about which I will need to use some judgement is around not doing something for someone that I think they can do for themselves.

They have a problem

The first thing about this is that the information is at least second hand and each person who has passed it on will have modified it in some way. Originally, the information is likely to have been from just one person's perspective, then it is another person's perspective on that information and so on.

At this stage is the information anything more than a rumour? Should I do anything with it at all? In particular, should I tell anyone else about it? If I do, I am responsible for passing on information which may be wholly inaccurate. It may be better to do nothing with the information.

If I do think that this is something that in some way concerns me and I want to do something about it then it behoves me to check the validity of what I have been told. As a former magistrate I have many times heard the prosecution present what seems to be an open and shut case then, when we are given further information from a different perspective, the whole case looks entirely different. It is not uncommon to find that, on

closer examination, the prosecution's evidence itself does not stand up and cases are dismissed for insufficient evidence before the defence has started.

We can, though, never know the complete truth, we can only hope for a good enough approximation to it. It is up to me with my integrity to judge whether what I know is good enough.

We may think that rules of evidence are arcane and complicated rules that serve mainly to keep lawyers in business. But we ignore them at our peril. They have been built up over years of, often bitter, experience. They form the basis for uncovering sufficiently good approximations to some form of truth.

In particular, it is usually important to find out about the source of the information, how it was obtained and what were the circumstances. Something that may sound serious at first can turn out to be of minor significance when the context is known.

Another thing is to consider the wider picture and particularly to consider information that may contradict what is being alleged. Appeals in court are frequently upheld on the basis that the prosecution has not revealed evidence that they have that does not support their case. If an allegation is being made about how someone behaves, there may also be information available that suggests that this is not how they usually behave.

The principle of innocent until proved guilty is about not expecting someone to prove a negative. It is easy to allege that someone is a thief. They could go on for ever demonstrating that they have not stolen things and never satisfy their accusers. It must be up to the accusers to prove that this person has stolen something. Indeed to demonstrate that someone is a habitual thief they would need to prove that they had stolen many things.

A problem in CCI, as it is in other organisations connected with personal development or therapy, is that allegations are often made about process, about what someone's intentions or motivations are. Someone may be said to be aggressive, abuses power, is manipulative or is trying to satisfy their own sexual urges. Since we can never actually know what someone's process really is, these

accusations can be neither proved nor disproved. Here I think I have to side with the behaviourists: what has to matter is what someone actually does, not why they might do it.

On first receiving a piece of information I may think that this is something I choose to be involved in. After making proper enquiry, considering the issues just outlined and probably including talking to the original people involved, if I still choose to be involved then something has become my problem. This takes us back to the first part of this article about what to do when I have a problem. I need to be clear about how it is a problem for me and act in my own right. Unless and until I am asked to do so by those concerned, I am not acting on anyone else's behalf and I have no business claiming to do so.

Of course, what I may discover is that I believe that accusations that are being made are unfounded. In which case my problem is about what to do with respect to those people who are making the allegations.

A reason why I may choose to become involved is that we all share responsibility for the well being of CCI. This, for instance, is why I have written this article and why I run many of the workshops that I do.

In summary

Many things can be done to deal with problems in CCI. We can develop these things by considering the nature of each problem, looking at the range of possible approaches and working with those that seem likely to be effective in each case.

What we do not need to do is to tie ourselves up in procedures and the power struggles that inevitably accompany them.

What is more effective, more appropriate to the nature of CCI and more useful for all of us in our everyday lives is to be continually building our skill and awareness, in particular our interpersonal and problem solving skills. Co-counselling does not inherently lead us towards these skills, they are separate but ones that are compatible with co-counselling and supportive of the CCI network. Co-counselling can help us to overcome barriers to learning or applying these skills.

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