

McCoCo Conference 2014

Recognising critical situations in a coco session by client and counsellor

Harvesting the notes made by JanPieter, John, Lilian and Marjan.

Compiled by JanPieter

Intro

We came together in Lilian's house the 6th of May, the day after McCoCo 2014.

We started with reading the questions. Next we had free flowing sharings, directly or indirectly linked to the questions. This document is the gathering of the individual notes of these sharings.

The original questions

The client

What critical situations in a session does a CLIENT need to be able to recognise in order to have a successful session?

For each situation, how can the CLIENT recognise when

- the situation is OK?
- the situation is on the edge of going wrong?
- the situation has gone wrong?

What might be the (bad) consequences if the CLIENT does not perceive the situation as going wrong?

The counsellor

What critical situations in a session does a COUNSELLOR need to be able to recognise in order for the Client to have a successful session?

For each situation, how can the COUNSELLOR recognise when

- the situation is OK?
- the situation is on the edge of going wrong?
- the situation has gone wrong?

What might be the (bad) consequences if the COUNSELLOR does not perceive the situation as going wrong?

The individual summaries

Marjan Tuk

Which situations does a Client need to be able to identify?

Before sessions

- Assessing the session space (living room / workshop space etc.) as appropriate for having a session.
- Is the choice of the counsellor appropriate for the topic you would like to work on? Their risk of getting restimulated with your topic, their ability to trigger awarely your buttons.
- What session contract is needed to have a successful situation?

During sessions: the relationship with the counsellor

- Having a session versus a chat: The difference between expressing something (emotion, hear yourself think) and an interview conversation.
- How much can you trust the confidentiality related to the topic you want to work on? What way of sharing is appropriate and relevant?

During sessions: content and process

- What is the balance between own attention and session content material? What session contract does this need?
- Recognising losing your balance of attention.
- When feeling helpless, irritable, anxious, pained, loved, excited etc., recognising whether these feelings contain a restimulation of an old experience (identification, projection) or are purely a reflection of the challenges posed by the here-and-now situation
- difference between feeling generally anxious, anger and aware of what triggers that emotion
- Working on topics while putting yourself down as a bad, nasty, clumsy, stupid, awkward person: I have a problem, therefore I am a problem
- Distinguishing between the emotional and practical aspects of a situation

Five meanings of 'Responsibility'.

1. Responsibility as **capability**: you are sane; you can vouch for your actions.
2. Responsibility as **cause**: You are responsible for the consequences of an act.
3. Responsibility as **liability**: You will be held liable for what you did or did not do.
4. Responsibility as **task**: the various tasks arising from a particular role that you are responsible for to fulfill.
5. Responsibility as **virtue**: a personal quality of a person, which we call a responsible person. It is a qualification that we usually assign afterwards.

Lilian Brzoska

Hi. Lilian B. here. After McCoCo we had the CCI Conference at my place in Kirkcaldy, with a working lunch spread between the Merchant's Garden Cafe and pot luck in my living room. We had sharing rounds and lively discussion focussed around the questions, " What critical situations in a session does a CLIENT need to be able to recognise in order to have a

successful session?” and “ What critical situations in a session does a COUNSELLOR need to recognise in order that the CLIENT might have a successful session?” In both cases, whether in Client Role or in Counsellor Role “ how do we recognise when the situation is OK, when it is on the edge of going wrong and when it has gone wrong?”

The following is a précis of some what I shared. I celebrate all the agreement we found and the disagreements we aired with honesty and consideration for one another.

In the Netherlands Worker and Co-worker are often used to replace Client and Counsellor and I shared that I feel this can a more helpful way of describing the dynamic of how a Co-Counselling Contract actually works. I find it helps clear notions in us all of counsellor being responsible for the direction or content focus of a client/worker's session. Such notions can filter in when learners are influenced by other uses of the words counsellor and client to describe non peer counselling relationships in the Mental Health and Alternative Therapeutic world, where, even in the humanistic culture, empathetic sounds, statements and directional advice are given, all be it lightly, from Counsellor to Client. I personally find “ noddy counsellors” infuriatingly intrusive and patronising, so, unless I ask for affirmations and smiles, I prefer my free attention giver to be fairly still and warm eyed, rather than effusively encouraging. I make sure I can be given what I prefer and am perfectly capable of being effusively encouraging if asked, though I find it challenging to receive... Perhaps I need to work on this... hahaha.. Work...endlessly emerging Being.

In Co-Counselling, **as Worker/Client** I know something is on the edge of going wrong if my Counsellor/Co-worker seems irritated by, or emotionally involved in, the direction in which I am taking my session. If they are not declaring restimulation, their emotions might be interfering with their ability to give me their free attention, which is a prerequisite in all contracts. To deal with this I might stop my session and ask the Co-worker if they need some time as Client to rebalance their attention.

As Co-worker/Counsellor I need to recognise the situation is on the edge of going wrong when my attention has shifted from my Client into my own process, in order that I might quickly rebalance my attention by focussing on THEM. If I cannot do this easily I might also need to declare restimulation and ask for some time as Worker to establish what has caused the potential problem, in order that I might clear through to being able to give good attention once more. This restimulation need not be overwhelming sadness or fury. It could be me falling in love with the Client's distress, giving smiling delight and longing to give inappropriate touch, rather than sharing unattached warm, supportive sisterly attention.

In Core Training we need to teach graceful ways of recognising when we are restimulated. We all need to practise rebalancing or releasing ourselves from the Counsellor Role if we are heavily restimulated or loose the plot. Should we catch ourselves being judgemental of our Client it is necessary to rebalance immediately. Perhaps, to recognise and work on this pattern with someone else, as soon as possible after the session, is a good idea. We may need to establish whether or not we might need to suggest this person find a Co-worker who is more supportive, in future, until we clear our attitude towards them. Depending on how much they remind us of other people we found difficult to love, or with whom we have been in love, this might take some time.

In the Client Role, although the counsellor helps co-create present time safety, we need to have the capacity to take care of our own emotional safety, by recognising we, alone, are in charge of the direction of the session at all times and not be afraid to challenge the co-worker if we are not receiving supportive eye contact and good free attention.

Before any session we need to awarely check the context, in order that we might read the situation to prevent unsuccessful sessions. ie..Am I too tired to give good attention? Does this person remind me of anyone? Do I find this person sexually attractive? For the latter two situations we have contracts which can help us get clearer. We need to use them if we are to keep our Co-Counselling network and occasional residential CoCo-communities free of unacknowledged manipulation patterns or unaware, abusive power-game relationships. We all have responsibilities within and outside session times in networks and communities.

Within sessions it is important Co-workers do not take things the Client is working through personally. It is also important as Worker not to become caught in rehearsing emotions, rather than discharging trapped feelings. To release ourselves from their subterranean power over our present time thinking and actions, blockages must be found, identified and cleared. This is our Work as Client. It is not the Counsellors Role to do this work for us. As Co-worker we can be asked for three different kinds of contract. It is important we are able to give the appropriate contract and not over-step the request to be "extra helpful".

Within social situations it is useful to notice when unaware clienting is happening and when we have locked into Free Attention giving, without negotiation. Both behaviours are disempowering. It is a challenge to stay out of Family Patterns when living and eating together periodically. It is useful to set up sessions to make sure we are not shutting down inappropriately or attention grabbing at every turn to cover over nervousness or fear.

We also discussed what might need to happen if someone was being a sexual predator in either role and I am not sure we came to any agreed conclusion about how, as a group, we might deal with this. Currently the responsibility for filtering out such people lies with the teachers when they agree to allow a student to enter the network. Beyond that it does not seem to me can do anything other than deal with each situation as it arises and ensure against abuses happening by underpinning all our interactions with respect for persons and clear negotiation of boundaries in pairs and groups. Exploring sexuality can happen in safely held groups and in other ways by negotiation. The parameters on what is one person's abuse and another person's delight are very difficult to pin down. What is good for a cloistered nun is not the same as what is healthy fun for a sexually active aware 21st Century adult. Learning to ask for what we would like clearly and to say "Yes "and "No" when we mean "Yes" and "No", early in our CoCounselling Life can help stop confusions and hurts happening by accident or design. For some people saying " No" to any request is a real challenge. For others saying " Yes " to themselves or to being good to themselves seems like an impossible dream. We continue to learn and grow as we practise asking for and receiving what we need to heal our hurts and feed our well being. The clearer we all become the less chance we have of over- stepping boundaries or being trodden upon and the faster we will reclaim our Lively Creative Being with which to give great attention and manifest tremendously successful sessions for ourselves as Clients, through which we find more and more treasures within to share with our friends and families of all kinds. Thanks for being at McCoCo and beyond. I celebrate the family of my Heart in Cocounselling International and all the co-working we do as we emerge beyond all oppressions to shine.

John Talbut

McCoCo conference 6th May 2014

The enquiry started from a presumption that there was a problem of co-counsellors being able to apply co-counselling tools and skills in some critical situations. Examples given of

these critical situations were losing the balance of attention as client, losing free attention as counsellor and clients rehearsing distress.

The use of the word “critical” at first suggests situations that are seriously bad. However, the meaning here is presumably meant to refer to a turning point. It is questionable whether such points really exist in co-counselling sessions. Wherever the session goes is potentially useful and if something does not work something else can be tried.

From the client's point of view we noted that various actions of the counsellor can be unhelpful. In general these involve the counsellor not keeping to the principles of co-counselling, for example by losing their free attention or using non co-counselling interventions.

The discussion moved to co-counsellors behaving inappropriately both during sessions and with other co-counsellors outside of sessions. In particular there may be situations where co-counsellors who are in some way vulnerable, generally though having difficulty holding their boundaries, being exploited or persecuted by others for example sexually or being made the butt of someone's distress about a class of people.

This issue has been addressed for as long as co-counselling has existed. In RC it was addressed by directing that co-counsellors should never work on their persecutory material with anyone from the relevant persecuted class of people.

This approach has a number of problems. In particular it leaves the responsibility with those who might be the persecutors. On the one hand such people may well be in pattern and hence behave irresponsibly. On the other hand it does nothing to support people's self empowerment and hence their ability to defend themselves against exploitation or persecution. In fact the approach is likely to be oppressive in that can reinforce people's feelings of helplessness.

Generally in CCI the approach has been towards supporting people to be more in their own power and to develop their ability to assert and hold their boundaries. We discussed, for example, how counsellors (i.e. the person in the counsellor role, etc.) can respond and if necessary end the session if their client is working in ways or on material that the counsellor finds too restimulating for them to be able to maintain free attention.

We discussed the issue of personal responsibility. Whilst in general we are not responsible for what anyone else feels or does, we are responsible for how we act in the light of what we may know about the likely affects our actions may have on others.

We discussed cases where in the case of groups of co-counsellors several members of the group are repeatedly restimulated by the actions of one of the group. It was suggested that in such cases the majority of the group should be able to assert and hold appropriate boundaries. If they have difficulty doing so the approach of any experienced co-counsellors who are or become involved should be support the group to learn to assert and maintain boundaries.

However, it was noted that there had been a number of cases in CCI where individuals had been blamed for how others felt and been excluded from groups.

Coming back to sessions, we were agreed that it was important for the counsellor to be able to maintain free attention. Consequently if we had material to work on or ways of working (e.g. spitting) that others might find restimulating we would need either to try to ensure that we worked with someone who would not be restimulated by the material or method, if necessary checking this out with them before arranging a session, or working in ways that

would not be restimulating e.g. using cushions, using gobbledegook or working in a small group where the counsellors would have support.

In the counsellor role it was suggested that it is important for the counsellor to be paying attention to the client's process including picking up any body cues. Interventions in normal contracts should be brief, timely and light. If the counsellor has any strength of feeling about how the client is working on their material that is a loss of free attention and something they may need to work on.

JanPieter

After the presentation of the conference questions, several topics arose that each in their own way affect the way how clients and counsellors might read or misread situations in their sessions.

Topic 1. Sexual seduction and grooming

People under the cover of a session use the ANSA contract to 'prove' to their counsellor that they are truly, cleanly and responsibly attracted to them. When things go wrong later in the affair, people 'seduced' in that way blame themselves for what happened.

Topic 2. Issues of intimacy, sexuality and sexual orientation

We also discussed cases in which several members of a group felt repeatedly restimulated by session material of one group member. Often this seems to have led to exclusion, especially when issues of intimacy, sexuality and sexual orientation or religion were involved.

Several thoughts were shared about this phenomenon.

1. These restimulations are not seen as own responsibility because the triggers of these restimulations are judged as trespassing 'society's values' as defined and defended by some more important group members. Not the people who cover their intentions up (e.g. in grooming people), but those people who openly own their own session material and interests are at risk to be excluded.
2. In terms of 'accusing' a person of unacceptable behaviour, people need to be supported to assess whether their judgement has been built on 'in principle recordable' evidence or is triggered by hearsay, assumptions and jumping to conclusions.
3. It was suggested that people in the *counsellor* role need to be supported more effectively
 - when losing free attention
 - with owning their restimulation
 - with assessing whether the situation consists of (wrongly) mind-reading the intentions of the restimulating party
4. It was suggested that people in the client role need to be supported more effectively
 - with negotiating properly with their counsellors whether it is OK for them to work on a particular topic.

Especially where it the Aware Negotiation of Sexual Attraction contract is concerned, people are recommended to have a chaperone counsellor there as well.

All this sharing and discussion lead to the following point: what does 'responsibility' mean?

Underlying topic: the use and abuse of the 'Responsibility' concept in co-counselling

At some point I read Marjan's list of five responsibility meanings to the group. This was followed by a discussion.

What I understand is as follows:

1. In order to stay in your own power or reclaim it, it is crucial and necessary to own fully (to take full responsibility for) your emotional responses and behaviours.
2. Having said that, if taking responsibility for your own emotional responses and actions implies putting yourself down, or taking your own failings or shortcomings personally, one is actually disempowering oneself. Thinking error of the shoe: I have a shoe, therefore I am a shoe.
3. Given the fallibility of perception there will always be people who do intentionally or unwarily orchestrate impressions for their own ends: charming, grooming, illusioning.
4. In the above case owning fully your own emotional responses and behaviours can lead to not challenging these behaviours of the 'seductor'.
5. However, challenging the above behaviours is fraught with difficulties: mind reading, fantasising evidence that is not there and interpreting events in self-fulfilling ways. All this can lead to excluding other interpretations because they do not support your restimulation.
6. Ironically, those people who are open and honest about their intentions, are much more likely to be held 'accountable' and then excluded and witch-hunted than people who groom secretly in the background.