

# The Therapeutic Alliance

## Session One

### Introduction

What is the therapeutic alliance? What are the components of a good therapeutic alliance? Why is having a positive therapeutic alliance between a counselor and a client important? This independent study defines and explains the components of a good working relationship between client and counselor, and provides several suggestions for building and maintaining a strong, positive therapeutic alliance.

### What is the Therapeutic Alliance?

The therapeutic alliance is a more encompassing term for therapy that emphasizes the collaborative nature of the partnership between counselor and client. This partnership incorporates client preferences and goals into treatment and outlines methods for accomplishing those goals. The therapeutic alliance is an alliance based on **listening** to the client without being judgmental or giving unwarranted advice. Some would say that the therapeutic alliance **is** the treatment program. Without a positive working relationship between counselor and client, there is unlikely to be any treatment progress.

A positive relationship between client and counselor may be one of the most important, and most frequently overlooked, variables for predicting client response to an intervention. It accounts for more variance in treatment outcomes than any single client characteristic. Extensive studies on the effects of the therapeutic alliance have been done in VA clinics, inpatient units, outpatient units and medical management clinics. Researchers have found that establishing a helping alliance and having good interpersonal skills are more important than professional training in achieving positive treatment outcomes.

## Research on the Therapeutic Alliance

So what have the studies of therapeutic alliance shown? What aspects of the counselor-client relationship are crucial to achieving a positive alliance? What is the exact relationship between the therapeutic relationship and treatment outcomes? What is a positive treatment outcome?

Research has shown that:

- Client ratings of the client-counselor relationship are the most consistent predictor of client improvement. If the client doesn't believe that you can help them change their behavior, they will be unlikely to overcome their resistance to treatment.
- Strong therapeutic relationships are predictors of positive outcomes in all treatment programs studied thus far, and with all types of clients. The relationship between client and counselor is more important than the type of therapy or intervention being applied to the client.
- The strength of the therapeutic bond is not highly correlated with the length of services. A strong client-counselor relationship can be established during the length of time it takes to conduct an interview. Think about your own experience with going to a new doctor. By the end of your first meeting, you knew whether you wanted to return to that doctor for further treatment.
- Counselor self-awareness can be a positive factor in developing a therapeutic alliance. Counselors must actively listen to the client and monitor their own responses to the client. However, self-awareness can become a negative factor if counselors spend too much time focusing on themselves and not on their clients.
- When dealing with family members of the client, in any capacity, it is also important to maintain a positive working relationship. Family members can be a great influence on the client, and if a positive alliance is not made between counselors and family members, it can negatively impact treatment outcomes, even if there is a strong therapeutic alliance with the client.
- The presence of hope can make a significant difference in how people deal with stress, difficulty, and problems. It has been shown time after time, especially in the literature pertaining to those with co-occurring disorders, that hope is essential to successful treatment

As discussed earlier, a positive therapeutic alliance has been correlated with better treatment outcomes for clients. Positive treatment outcomes include:

- Reductions in substance consumption
- Increased abstinence rates
- Better social adjustment
- More successful referrals to treatment

## **Session One Exercise**

1. In groups of two, share an experience that has had a profound effect on your life. As a listener, ask questions and seek clarification.
  
2. After both people have shared, reflect on the alliance the two of you have formed through sharing a personal experience. How did it feel to tell someone about an issue that was important to you?
  
3. How did the listener make you feel as you were sharing?
  
4. What kind of body language did the listener use?

## **Session Two**

### Establishing the Therapeutic Alliance

An alliance is created through understanding, acceptance and respect. Most people begin therapy and/or services with the expectation that it will help. **Hope** accompanies this expectation. It is essential to maintain that hope through a positive therapeutic relationship.

Counselor attributes that contribute to a positive therapeutic relationship include:

- Non-possessive warmth
- Friendliness
- Genuineness
- Respect
- Affirmation
- Empathy

The therapeutic alliance is at its most beneficial when the counselor is actively **listening** to the client. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Be receptive to the unknown
- With every conversation between two people there are at least six people present:
  - What each person said is two people
  - What each person meant to say are two more people
  - What each person understood the other to say are two more people
- When there is judgment about what is revealed, the speaker is sealed off from the listener. There is no longer an exchange.
- Be careful not to give advice to the client unless asked directly for it, especially during the pre-engagement and engagement stages. Giving advice that the client is not yet ready to hear or deal with lessens the strength of the therapeutic alliance and makes the client feel as though you are not really listening to what the client wants. To truly aid the client, it is essential to listen and clarify the issue with the client, not to tell them what you think should be done.
- Be a vigilant inward listener. Pay attention to nonverbal cues such as body language. Ask yourself “Is there something the client is trying to say that I’m not getting?” and pursue what you don’t understand.

A helpful technique for establishing the therapeutic alliance through listening is to use a motivational interviewing technique known as **reflective listening**. To use reflective listening, simply repeat back to the client what you hear them saying to you. You can also rephrase or paraphrase what they’ve said. At the deepest level of reflective listening, you are reflecting the client’s feelings back to them. Some things to remember about reflective listening are:

- It is essentially hypothesis testing. You are repeating to the client your understanding of what they are feeling. The client will either support or deny your hypothesis, but either way you come to understand the client better.

- It includes an interest in what your client feels, and a desire to truly understand how your client sees the world. Clients (like everyone else) appreciate a genuine attempt by the counselor to see things from their point of view.
- What you think a client means may not be what the client really means. Reflective listening helps to clarify and correct misunderstandings or misperceptions on the part of the counselor. It also makes the client appraise and assess their own feelings more carefully.

Here are several other suggestions for developing and maintaining a positive therapeutic alliance:

- Support the client's drive to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. It may be helpful to review these goals periodically to clarify them and to relate what is being done during counseling sessions to the eventual achievement of their goals.
- Offer understanding and unconditional acceptance of the client. It is also important to develop a genuine liking of the client *in some way*. Clients can sense your dislike of them. While you may find it difficult to "like" a client who commits a violent act while under the influence of alcohol, there is a good chance that you can find *something* that you like about the client. It could be his taste in music, his love of fishing or his ironic sense of humor. It is important to find an aspect of the client that you like and can relate to, and use that to deepen your alliance.
- Aid the client in finding and holding on to activities that maintain a positive level of functioning for the client. This includes identifying activities that can serve as alternatives to situations in which the client usually abuses substances.
- Offer a hopeful, but realistic attitude that the counseling goals can be met and that you as a counselor are committed to helping the client attain them.
- Recognize and praise the client when they have made progress toward attaining their goals. Progress toward client goals can include showing up for the counseling session. Some counselors choose to use motivators such as providing food at counseling sessions, or giving a monetary rewards when certain, measurable goals have been met (such as having a clean drug screen). These motivators can have positive effects on alliance development.
- Find different ways to encourage clients to express themselves whenever possible. Some clients express themselves better verbally, others prefer more non-verbal methods.
- When you as the counselor recognize that there has been a rift in the counselor-client relationship, acknowledge it and directly address it. Not only are you then repairing the alliance, you are also modeling positive, relationship-building behavior.

## Session Two Exercise

1. Think about a close friendship you have. It could be someone you have known since high school, or someone you have just met recently but enjoy spending time with. What are some of the characteristics of this relationship that make it so enjoyable?
2. How do you communicate with each other? Do you communicate primarily through verbal or non-verbal means? How do you know when the other person has a problem?
3. What do you do when one of you has an issue that needs to be addressed?
4. What do you do when you have a disagreement? How do you resolve an argument between you?
5. While some of the activities and interactions you have with close friends would be inappropriate with clients, many of the characteristics of friendships are similar to those necessary to a therapeutic alliance. Which of the above characteristics and interactions would be helpful to use when establishing a therapeutic alliance with a client? Which of the above behaviors would it NOT be appropriate to use when working with a client?
6. Reflect on how you can utilize and transform the skills you already have in establishing a friendship into skills that will enable you to form a therapeutic alliance with a client.

## **Session Three**

### Spirituality and the Therapeutic Alliance

Spirituality, like the therapeutic alliance itself, is a subject that is often ignored by counselors as a means of connecting and maintaining connection with clients. While some clients do not feel they are spiritual persons, many clients do. Clients who are spiritual come from many religions, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Finding and appreciating potentially diverse client spirituality is a powerful way to establish a therapeutic alliance. Here are several steps for incorporating recognition of spirituality in counseling sessions:

1. Spiritual Self-Awareness
  - Assess your own spiritual beliefs, practices, attitudes and their development throughout your life. Reflect on how these may impact the formation of a therapeutic alliance.
  - Be conscious of your own biases regarding spirituality or religion.
  - Assess your personal counseling style and whether there are any spiritual implications of your style.
2. Spirituality-Oriented Attitude
  - Develop appreciation, empathy and respect for all spiritual orientations, experiences, and practices. Respect is essential for a therapeutic alliance.
  - Be willing to seek outside consultation on spirituality when you feel your own knowledge is not sufficient to answer client concerns.
3. Relevant Knowledge
  - Have a general understanding of the basics of major world religions and resources for those who wish to know more about those religions, or practice within them.
  - Be aware of spiritual traditions and religions common to the population with which you work.
  - Be aware of how spirituality influences human development and relationships.
  - Understand how spirituality influences perceptions of disease and the healing process.
  - Understand the values inherent in the theories you apply in practice and compare them to the values inherent in client spirituality.
4. Specific Spirituality Competencies
  - Ask the client about their spirituality and have them differentiate between spirituality and religion.
  - Engage the client in a discussion about what spiritual activities bring them comfort and inner strength (such as meditation, walking on the beach, etc.)
  - Formulate counseling goals with an awareness of spiritual aspects.
  - Understand how personal life experiences of the client (such as abuse, mental health issues, etc.) impact their spirituality and vice versa.
  - Maintain a directory of local churches, synagogues, prayer groups, healers, and colleagues of varying spiritual orientations.

## Session Three Exercise

This exercise is designed to clarify your personal values on some prominent issues in social work. For each question, develop your answer while keeping in mind how your answer might affect another person with different personal and spiritual values. How can you best address the situation or answer the question while maintaining your own spirituality and being respectful of others' beliefs? Remember, a crucial part of establishing a therapeutic alliance with your client is maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude. Here are the questions:

1. You are a social worker with Child Welfare Services and have received evidence that a father is sexually abusing his 12 year old daughter. Do you seek to counsel the family in hopes of keeping the family intact, or do you have the father arrested to end the incest?
2. An 18 year old girl comes to your office and tells you she is pregnant, but doesn't feel she is ready to have her baby. She wants to know your advice. What do you tell her?
3. Do you think a gay or lesbian teacher should be allowed to teach in elementary and secondary schools?
4. An elderly woman has a terminal illness and is in intense pain. She tells you that she wants to end her life. Do you think her physician should be allowed to end her life at her request? What would you say to this woman?
5. Should condoms and other contraceptives be provided to middle school and high school children?
6. Do you support affirmative action programs that give preference to minorities and women over Caucasian males?
7. Do you think women and in the military should fight in combat?

Separate into small groups and share your answers to the above questions. Once everyone has shared, go around the group again and discuss how you felt when someone shared an answer that you disagreed with. How would you react to that person if you were the counselor listening to a client's opinion? How would you react to that person if you were the client listening to your counselor's opinion? Reflect on how your spirituality may have influenced your reactions.

## The Therapeutic Alliance

### Final Quiz

Define the therapeutic alliance.

List two counselor attributes that contribute to a positive therapeutic alliance.

- 1.
- 2.

What is a helpful motivational interviewing technique for establishing the therapeutic alliance? What does it consist of?

List two ways to integrate an awareness of spirituality into your counseling practice.

- 1.
- 2.

# The Therapeutic Alliance

## Final Quiz

### Answer Key

Define the therapeutic alliance.

**The therapeutic alliance is a more encompassing term for therapy that emphasizes the collaborative nature of the partnership between counselor and client.**

List two counselor attributes that contribute to a positive therapeutic alliance.

**Counselor attributes that contribute to a positive therapeutic relationship include:**

- **Non-possessive warmth**
- **Friendliness**
- **Genuineness**
- **Respect**
- **Affirmation**
- **Empathy**

What is a helpful motivational interviewing technique for establishing the therapeutic alliance? What does it consist of?

**A helpful motivational interviewing technique for establishing the therapeutic alliance is reflective listening.**

**Reflective listening consists of simply repeating back to the client what you hear them saying to you.**

List two ways to integrate an awareness of spirituality into your counseling practice.

- **Ask the client about their spirituality and have them differentiate between spirituality and religion.**
- **Engage the client in a discussion about what spiritual activities bring them comfort and inner strength (such as meditation, walking on the beach, etc.)**
- **Formulate counseling goals with an awareness of spiritual aspects.**
- **Understand how personal life experiences of the client (such as abuse, mental health issues, etc.) impact their spirituality and vice versa.**
- **Maintain a directory of local churches, synagogues, prayer groups, healers, and colleagues of varying spiritual orientations.**

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