

Care for the counsellor

Shirley Cullup reflects on how practitioners can look after themselves

Much has been written about counselling in the workplace over the last 20 years, a period that coincides with my transformation from an HR manager (personnel manager in those days!) into an independent workplace counsellor and senior accredited counsellor.

Today counselling is very much to the fore in large and small companies, helping employees maintain wellbeing and a work/life balance^{1,2}.

Over my career, life has changed considerably not only with new technology but in the way we work, how many hours and years we work, and how long we stay in any particular job.

Twenty years ago when constructing a CV we were told that 'long-term service' was an asset but now it shrieks of boredom, lack of initiative, an 'afraid to move on' syndrome. Hence after two or three years we look for pastures new.

However, constantly changing jobs can have its own drawbacks, new environments, new people, different locations and, of course, many new challenges.

How has this affected me, the independent workplace counsellor? How to cope with an ever-changing clientele, especially if working with short-term therapy (five or six sessions, maybe even less). A short snapshot of someone's life. A few brief hours to work your 'counselling magic'. Then they disappear from view and you move on.

How does a counsellor cope with this ever-changing scene?

Let me share some thoughts. Self-care is very important. Please pause and consider your own strengths and weaknesses. Are you doing a good job? What effect is counselling, especially short-term work, having on your personal life or your health? How do you deal with the tears, anger or frustration from the client, accounts of bereavement and loss, trauma, conflict, violence, work issues such as bullying and harassment, hostility, stress and all the other bits and pieces that flow out during each session? Are you coping with this ever-changing sea of people? It may well be very rewarding work but also very challenging. Can you recognise and manage your own stress?

The following is a checklist (in no particular order) that helps me consider my own self-care and I hope will be a useful reflective tool for you.

Ethical framework

The first step must be to abide by a reliable and workable code of ethics (mine is BACP, but others exist such as COSCA and BPS) that focuses on key issues such as confidentiality, regular supervision and continuing professional development (CPD). These frameworks help to identify boundaries within which I can stake out my practice.

A good time plan

- Time limitations, how many people per day/week – what is too few/too many?
- How much time between appointments – 15 or 30 minutes?
- What about clients who arrive early and is there a suitable place for them to wait?
- Preparation time – what do you need to do to prepare for a particular client?
- Time to write up notes – are these process, supervision or factual notes?
- Time for evaluation of oneself – when do you review yourself?
- Time for referrals – why do referrals always come in at dinner time?!
- Time for CPD – and what is your focus for CPD?
- How does all this fit with being a full-time workplace counsellor?

Qualifications and training

- Recognised qualifications (in my case BACP senior accredited counsellor)
- Thorough training from reputable organisations
- Attending annual conferences
- Participating in workshops
- Ensuring enough CPD
- Monitoring and reviewing your way of working.

It is important to know you are offering an efficient, effective service and maintaining a good working relationship not only with immediate clients but also any third party companies you may work for.

Knowledge

- Knowing limitations and own boundaries
- When and who to refer to when counselling ends
- Being aware of other local resources
- Ensuring you are reading and learning about common psychoactive medications
- Knowledge of physical and mental illness,

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common mental health problems

- Knowledge of physical health problems with psychological consequences
- Reading relevant professional journals/books³.

Health

- Identifying risks for you and your client⁴
- Client dependency
- Care and safety for yourself and others
- Remembering to say 'no' if you have too many clients or the work is not in your 'field'
- Knowledge of your own body – its physical and mental care
- Recognising your own fatigue
- Are you suffering from muscular tension?
- Are you sleeping well, do you wake in the night with things on your mind?
- Do you become preoccupied?
- How are your energy levels?

Support

- Build a good rapport with your supervisor, listen to advice and constructive criticism
- Ensure support from other colleagues – do not work in isolation
- Communicate with other professionals.

Preparation, monitoring and review

I take pride in continuing to offer a professional service. However consider these three steps and their development for self-care.

Preparation before the work

- Choose a safe location for you and your client
- Do a risk assessment of the counselling room and the building
- Are there others in the building?
- Health and safety – consider critical incidents such as a fire or bomb threat
- If a client became violent is there an escape route?
- How was the client referred? Do you have any background knowledge?
- Where do I sit? Near the door is sensible in case the client becomes violent or disturbed
- Ensure others are aware of your presence in the building⁴.

During the work

- Arrange an assessment session (can you do the work?) and then form a contract with the client
- Is the client comfortable with seating arrangements, are you on the same seating level as the client?
- Ask the client if they are comfortable working with you
- Can you provide fresh drinking water and tissues?

- Explain the rules and boundaries, eg confidentiality, time limitations, data protection
- Do you have contingency plans if the client is really upset at the end of the session?
- Can you switch from one client to another without a break?

After the work

- Do you look after yourself?
- How do you relax – do you make time for leisure?
- Do you write up your notes immediately or later – what works for you?

Experience matters

What has my experience taught me in relation to self-care? And does it compare with yours?

- I try to have a complete break from counselling for a short while during my working day other than just a lunch hour (four to five clients a day maximum seems to be a good number for me).
- I remember I am not omnipotent – I cannot take on work if I am not fully prepared or it is not in my sphere of competence or experience.
- I am aware of my physical limitations, ie if I get an aching back or a stiff neck (a monthly physiotherapy massage sorts this out with soothing oils and heat – more often if I recognise more symptoms).
- Thinking time and space for myself.
- Leisure activities such as dog walking, swimming and being involved with musical activities.
- Seeing family and friends
- Keeping in touch with colleagues.
- Training and CPD.
- Regularly appraising myself.

Conclusion

The body is a machine in many respects. In common with your car it needs constant care and maintenance to function in tiptop shape.

I have found my time as a counsellor within the workplace to be more than that. A counsellor is a human being giving time diligently, professionally, mentally and physically. There is a reward in enabling a fellow human to cope and to overcome that which originally beset them. However, be kind to yourself while ensuring that a pattern of regular maintenance and self-assessment becomes a habit. ■

References

- 1 Dryden W. Charles-Edwards D, Woolfe R. Handbook of counselling in Britain. Tavistock-Routledge; 1989.
- 2 Coles A. Counselling in the workplace. Open University Press; 2003.
- 3 Reid M. (ed) The reality of practice. Palgrave Macmillan; 2004.
- 4 Despenser S. Risk assessment – the personal safety of the counsellor. *therapy today*. 2007;18(2).