Resistance in Counseling

Client Resistance

What is it?
– Any conscious or unconscious attempt to avoid a topic of discussion, avoid working on a problem, or avoid committing to the counseling relationship.
– Client resistance can range from the expression of very subtle behaviors to outright defiance.

Resistance

Overview
• Client resistance is a normal and common part of the counseling process (why?).
• Often, resistance is a product of the counseling relationship
  – not always a “trait” of the client
  – resistance is a signal that the counselor needs to change how he/she relates to the client
Counselor responses that may elicit resistance

- Arguing for change.
- Assuming the expert role, lecturing.
- Criticizing, blaming, or shaming.
- Being in a hurry.
- Clamming preeminence “I know what is best for you.”

Resistance...

Although a normal part of the counseling process, unmanaged client resistance:

a) can impede the achievement of the client's therapeutic goals,
b) is associated with higher drop-out rates,
c) is predictive of poorer treatment outcomes.

Why do clients resist?

- To protect the self from fear, vulnerability, shame, fear of criticism, etc.
- Client is angry at the counselor.
- Clients “coerced” to treatment and who feel they do not need to be there (DSS, probation, at request of family, etc)
- Disconnect between client's goals and therapist's agenda.
- Multicultural issues
- Power issues—client enjoys power over others
Transtheoretical Model of Change

1. **Precontemplation**: Client not yet considering change, or does not see a problem (denial, external problem, etc).
2. **Contemplation**: Client is aware of the problem, but ambivalent about making a change (“on the fence”).
3. **Preparation**: Client is committed to change in the near future, but still considering which action to take.
4. **Action**: Client is actively taking steps to change but have not yet reached stability in attaining goals.
5. **Maintenance**: Client has achieved their initial goals and working to maintain changes.
6. **Relapse**: Temporary slide back to problem behaviors of symptoms.
What Stage of Change?
(Pre-Contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance)

1. “My using is not that bad. Can you do anything to get the PO off my back”?
2. “I might need some help figuring out how to not use with my peers. Are there other kids I can talk to that might have suggestions”
3. “When I hear other group members talk about how their use got them into trouble and how using hurt their families, part of me relates, and still there is this other part of me that is not sure my use is really that bad.”

Types of Client Resistance

- **Response quantity resistance**
  - Client is non-compliant with the therapy process. i.e. missing session, silence, minimal talk. Common with involuntary clients.

- **Response content resistance**
  - Client attempts to constrict or control information communicated to the counselor. i.e. small talk, gossip, intellectual talk, ask series of meaningless questions, etc.

- **Response style resistance**
  - Involved in client style of thinking/communicating. i.e. externalizing, counselor stroking, forgetting, last minute disclosure.
  - Try to dissuade counselor from pushing too hard into certain areas.

- **Logistic management resistance**
  - Violate basic rules of counseling practice, i.e. poor appointment keeping, payment delay, personal favor asking, etc.
  - Behavior creates distraction. Often indicates client has negative attitude towards counseling process or counselor.
Common Resistance behaviors

- **Arguing** *(Challenging, discounting, Hostility, defiance)*
- **Interrupting** *(Cutting off, talking over, etc)*
- **Denying** *(blaming, excusing, minimizing, disagreeing, etc)*
- **Ignoring** *(no answer, no response, inattention, etc)*
- **Behavioural** *(avoiding eye contact, missed sessions, coming late, etc)*
- **Externalizing** *(not focusing on themselves, storytelling, etc.)*

How do you know if client resistance is getting the better of you?

- You feel like you are fighting or arguing with your client, not making any headway
- You feel stress and drained after the session
- You are working harder in the session than your client is.
- You are feeling burnt out with your work

Dealing With Resistance

**Minor/reflective approaches**

- Simple Reflection
- Reflection of Feeling
- Double-sided Reflection
  - Both sides of ambivalence presented
- Amplified Reflection
  - Reflect back what the client has said—in amplified or exaggerated form. (goal is to get client to back off a bit and to elicit other side of ambivalence).
Dealing with Resistance
Strategic Approaches

• Shifting Focus
• Emphasizing personal choice and control.
• Working with parts
• Confrontation

Other tips for dealing with resistance
1. Educating client about resistance and how it works
2. Allowing client choices to be active part of counseling process
3. Fostering collaboration between counselor and client.
4. Brainstorming pros and cons of current behavior
5. Gently persisting when a client is unable or unwilling to proceed

Tips....
• Stay out of “expert” position
• Don’t collude with client’s excuses (allowing them to be the victim, or powerless)
• Always treat resistance with respect (clt has a reason for resisting)