

## The Stance

*The paradox of reality is that no image is as compelling as the one which exists only in the mind's eye.*

–Shana Alexander

**A**s the commercial begins, a young man with long flowing hair is sitting comfortably in a leather chair located before a large stereo speaker . . . a very large stereo speaker. In a moment's flash the music begins, and as if placed in a wind tunnel, the young man's hair cascades backward while he feverishly hangs on to the chair. For new and experienced counselors alike, this can be a common professional experience when attempting to sort through the details of a client's story. People have much to say and may have waited weeks for an opportunity to say it: a retelling that progresses through a series of events often ending in a familiar feeling of hopelessness and helplessness. Clearly, individuals and families need safety and space to tell their stories. However, if the counselor seeks only to "hang on" to the chair as the client's story swiftly flows past, then a number of outcomes are likely: Although feeling heard, the client will leave with the same conclusions and emotional consequences that he or she had when entering the session; the counselor will become preoccupied with *putting the pieces of the story together*, leading to the overuse of closed-ended questions and content summaries; and when clinical listening becomes *content heavy* on facts, events, and consequences, the only available interventions are problem-solving strategies. Although these strategies may have potential benefit, if offered prematurely this teaching intervention can result in clients defending the status quo in response to a counselor's benevolent suggestions for personal change. It is far more helpful, and efficient, to build counseling relationships through *shared understanding* between the counselor and client of how problem stories are experienced rather than through what is being told.

A *shared understanding* results from clients experiencing a counselor's appreciation of the struggles, values, and impact the problem narrative is having in clients' lives and on their relationships. It requires counselors to engage in the process of understanding not just client problems and the stories surrounding them but also who clients are. Actively sharing the valor, loyalty, persistence, honesty, prudence, and acceptance transparent when confronting life struggles allows clients to experience their stories and themselves differently,

while building a personal knowledge of unrecognized strengths necessary when considering change. The following are key counselor characteristics central to understanding the perceptions people experience around their presenting problems as well as the perceptions they have of themselves. By entering the counseling process with an *attitude of curiosity*, a *stance of acceptance*, and an *appreciation for ambivalence* inherent in decisions related to personal and social change, therapeutic trust is established. This is the foundation of the phases of strength-centered counseling and of the idea that people have the resources and strengths to withstand and prosper in the face of life challenges.

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## **AN ATTITUDE OF EMPATHIC CURIOSITY**

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*It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education.*

–Albert Einstein

Curiosity stems from the Latin root *cura*, meaning to “handle with care.” It also highlights a desire to know or learn something extraordinary (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2009). An *attitude of empathic curiosity* is a willingness to enter into and share the extraordinary world of another as well as a desire to acknowledge that which is remarkable in our clients. Consider moments in your life when you might have felt overwhelmed and remained motionless when facing struggles. In what ways might it have been helpful to have a counselor recognize and appreciate the impact of your struggles while recognizing the values, hopes, and personal strengths you brought to bear in “keeping your head above water”? An *attitude of empathic curiosity* seeks to understand a client’s struggle and problems by orienting toward the strengths, hopes, values, emotion, and remarkable personal qualities emergent from lives struggling “for something different.” From a strength-centered perspective, every struggle and each problem presented in counseling implies personal strengths about the client and the efforts in standing up to adversity. These strengths are not affirmations or wishful thinking, because this would be more about the counselor’s need to comfort than the client’s need to be comforted. Strength reflections are accurate representations of those qualities and characteristics inherent in every struggle to “right the ship” and “keep our heads above water” that go unnoticed due to the noise and urgency of the storm. It is the noise and urgency of life’s storms that can narrow perception and quickly generate a cycle where fear begets fear and the experience of anxiety serves only to highlight life’s worries. White and Epston (1990) described this pattern as a “problem-saturated” life where individuals perceive, anticipate, and act on only those experiences consistent with their personal “narratives.”

An *attitude of empathic curiosity* demonstrated by counselors toward clients can serve to widen the perceptual window of others and provide opportunities for the inclusion of unrecognized and omitted experiences highlighting personal strengths and resilient efforts. For a better understanding of the counseling stance of *empathic curiosity* and how it informs the strength-centered counselor, think of a recent personal struggle. As if you are the counselor, reflect on each guiding question below, and respond as if you are the client. Make note of your experience, and share your reactions in your journal or with a learning partner:

- What does your struggle imply about your values, your hopes?
- What beliefs about yourself, others, and the world around you are being challenged or possibly compromised as you reflect on your struggle?
- What does it mean to you to have this struggle?
- What have you learned about yourself? How have you sustained yourself in the face of this struggle?
- Referring to Table 5.1, Strength Characteristics, what personal strengths have you needed to tap into?
- What does the struggle imply about what you prefer to be different in yourself and/or in your life? What strengths will you likely need to develop in order to see this occur, even just a little?

**Table 5.1** Strength Characteristics

<i>Categories of Strengths</i>	<i>Strengths</i>
<i>Wisdom and Knowledge Use of Knowledge</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creativity</li> <li>• Curiosity</li> <li>• Judgment and Open-Mindedness</li> <li>• Love of Learning</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
<i>Courage Exercise of Will</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bravery (Valor)</li> <li>• Perseverance</li> <li>• Honesty</li> <li>• Zest</li> </ul>
<i>Humanity and Love Befriending Others</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity to Love and Be Loved</li> <li>• Kindness</li> <li>• Social Intelligence</li> </ul>
<i>Justice Civic Responsibility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Fairness</li> <li>• Leadership</li> </ul>
<i>Temperance Protection Against Excess</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forgiveness and Mercy</li> <li>• Modesty and Humility</li> <li>• Prudence</li> <li>• Self-Regulation</li> </ul>
<i>Transcendence and Meaning Connection to the Larger Universe</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</li> <li>• Gratitude</li> <li>• Hope</li> <li>• Humor</li> <li>• Religiousness and Spirituality</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Peterson and Seligman (2004).

## A STANCE OF ACCEPTANCE

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*Yet, listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know.*

–Carl Rogers (1980)

Empathy is a willingness to let others know that you know what life might be like from their frames of experience. It embodies an *acceptance* of actions without evaluation, and the presence of ideas without judgment. Empathy provides a climate that stands in stark contrast to common interactions we have with supervisors, teachers, principals, police officers, parents, friends, and family where their “approval” is contingent on a set of behaviors or actions. Adolescents referred to counseling have been reminded often of their misbehaviors, shortcomings, and inability to engender adult approval. To accept others “unconditionally” is to acknowledge that people are more than just an accumulation of past behaviors and failed attempts to change (Rogers, 1957). They are defined by the strengths, resources, and characteristics learned and brought to bear against life’s evolving challenges, and not by the weight of their histories. This type of listening represents a decision to *suspend* personal values in order to walk in the shoes of another and reflect back the emotions, values, and strengths *implied* in their struggle and the hopes *transparent* in the conflict.

Rarely does a parent begin a session with,

You know, I have become acutely aware that my overreactions with my teenage daughter are actually reflections of my hopes that she will not make the same mistakes I made, and I am wondering how I might find better ways to express those values without always arguing about what I don’t want and listening more to what she wants.

If only all sessions began like this! More often than not, the essence of another’s experience is reflected in the *complaints*, implied in the *symptoms*, and transparent in the *expectations* illustrated within the stories brought to counseling. Below are common complaints presented by clients early in counseling. Beside each complaint is a potential strength-centered counselor response demonstrating both an empathic understanding of the problem and an acceptance of the experience and worldview of the client (see Table 5.2). Make note of how these reflective responses might have differed from your own, if you were the counselor.

The sample responses in Table 5.2 demonstrate an empathic *stance of acceptance* to the complaint, symptom, or expectation introduced by clients. Although each statement is focused on “another,” the empathic reflection is focused on the client worldview and experience. With a learning partner, discuss potential reactions that counselors might have to the client expressions above and how these might hinder demonstrating empathy through a *stance of acceptance*. What might be other counselor responses that focus on the client worldview and experience?

**Table 5.2** Reflected Experience: Complaint, Symptom, Expectation

<i>Possible Client Statement Problem/Complaint</i>	<i>Potential Counselor Response Empathic Acceptance</i>
<p><i>Complaint</i></p> <p>“My husband has had a drinking problem for a long time. I’ve left him twice, and each time he stopped for a while. Things are nice between us when he isn’t drinking. Recently, he said he can control his drinking, but I am afraid he’s going to start up again. I don’t know what to do.”</p>	<p>“You value trusting others, but you’re unsure about trusting yourself to make the right decision because you don’t want to be disappointed that you might not be able to trust your husband.”</p>
<p><i>Symptom</i></p> <p>“I worry about my daughter all the time. I know she is 18 and needs to find her way at college, but I find myself sleeping less and less. My husband says I’m distracted and just wants me to ‘let it go.’ I just can’t seem to stop thinking about her.”</p>	<p>“You want your daughter to know that even though you know that she is grown up enough to be away on her own, part of you still sees her as your little girl and you want to protect her, and it’s upsetting to you that your husband doesn’t feel the same attachment to her.”</p>
<p><i>Expectation</i></p> <p>“My family is nuts. We fight all the time. I never know what to do. I just want us not to fight so much.”</p>	<p>“You’d like it if your family were just like happy families you see on TV, with lots of harmony and joking around. That way you’d know what to expect. It that partly it?”</p>

## AN APPRECIATION FOR AMBIVALENCE

*It is never too late to be what you might have been.*

–George Eliot

W. R. Miller and Rollnick (2002), in their seminal work on the tenets of Motivational Interviewing, described ambivalence as a central experience to be explored and resolved when discussing behavior changes with clients. Ambivalence is perceived as a normal reaction to the human experience when balancing “the need to do something different” with “the benefits of doing more of the same.” Anyone who has sought to change an aspect of his or her lifestyle (e.g., smoking, weight loss, exercise) knows this inner dialogue well. It is not the absence of ambivalence that embodies motivation, but the presence of it. This often flies in the face of traditional addiction models that perceive ambivalence as the “door to relapse” and a “red flag” signaling a lack of motivation, illustrative of resistance. It is consistent with a two-dimensional life perspective where change either occurs or it does not. This perception can be heard in the experience of clients and families as they describe a reluctance to sacrifice the known for the unknown, the resignation that change

is hopeless, the rebellion that change would be a “giving in” to another’s demand, and/or rationalization of how change, although needed, is unlikely given the current status of things. Offering suggestions, albeit benevolent, only parallels this perspective and can quickly lead to a “yes, but” conversation and continued feelings of hopelessness and helplessness for both clients and counselors. To experience this more fully, attempt the activity below with a learning partner. Afterward, reflect on how this pattern emerges in your relationships.

### **Activity: Benevolent Suggestions**



#### **Person A (A voice warning against change)**

Express a current life dilemma to your partner. When offered a suggestion, respond with, “Yes, but . . .” and continue your explanation.

#### **Person B (A voice for change)**

Listen and respond empathically. When ready, provide a benevolent suggestion with reasons why this would be helpful for your partner.

Person A responds to suggestion with, “Yes, but . . .”

Person B listens empathically and provides an additional suggestion.

Repeat this for process for 8 to 10 minutes

Trade roles; reflect on the experience

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This type of interchange can occur in almost any relationship and, as you experienced above, can leave both parties frustrated. This is often illustrated in counselors who conclude that clients are *resistant* or *noncompliant* with treatment suggestions, and clients that feel misunderstood and discounted regarding the complexities of their lives. It is the responsibility of strength-centered counselors, and not the clients they serve, to promote a *shared understanding*. Therefore, it is important to resist the “righting response” where the counselor directly or implicitly takes up the “positive side” of change. A pro-change stance by the counselor often leaves folks in the unenviable position of defending the status quo—whether they want to or not. Normalizing and recognizing the inherent ambivalence associated with life struggles provides a window to better understanding personal difficulties associated with change. It also provides recognition of the complexities and the multidimensional views of the human experience.

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### **PROFESSIONAL GROWTH ACTIVITY: THE COMPLEXITIES OF CHANGE**



In a small group (three or four) decide on one member who will sit on the floor while the others stand. Make note of the following instructions and the process questions following the experience.

- *Instructions for the sitting individual:* You have good reasons for sitting. Although you consider standing at times, and others have encouraged you to, the thought of it seems overwhelming at times. For now, you have decided to sit.
- *Instructions for those standing:* You each have good reasons to get the person sitting to stand. Not only are you evaluated on your success to get folks to stand, but you also have limited time. Without the use of physical force, your work as a team is somehow to get the person sitting on the floor to stand.
- *Process Questions:*
  - What was this experience like for the “sitters”? For the “standers”?
  - What strategies were utilized by the standers? Which proved to be helpful and which did not? Do you utilize any of these strategies in work with people now? How come?
  - For those sitting, of the strategies utilized by your peers, which proved to be most helpful? Which were not? How would you describe your struggle between sitting and the possible desire to stand? How might this be similar in your own life or the lives of those you work with?

## COUNSELOR INTERVIEW & REFLECTION GUIDE

### Shared Understanding: The Stance

<i>Focus</i>	<i>Intervention</i>
<p><i>Shared Understanding</i> <i>An Attitude of Curiosity</i></p>	<p><i>Professional Reflection Questions for the Counselor</i>            What does the struggle imply about the values and hopes of the client?            What client beliefs are being challenged or possibly compromised in the face of the struggles? What does it mean for the client to have this struggle?            What are clients learning about themselves? How have they sustained themselves in facing the struggle?            What personal strengths have they needed to tap into? (See Table 5.2, Strength Characteristics)            What does their struggle imply about what they would prefer different in themselves or in their lives? What strengths will likely need to be developed in order to see this occur, even just a little?</p>
<p><i>A Stance of Acceptance</i></p>	<p><i>Professional Reflection Questions for the Counselor</i>            Do the clients know that you know the essence of their experience reflected in the complaints, implied in the symptoms, and transparent in the expectations illustrated within their narrative?            What are the emotions, values, and strengths implied in the struggle and the hopes transparent in the conflict?</p>

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<i>Focus</i>	<i>Intervention</i>
<i>Ambivalence Appreciation</i>	<p>What does his or her struggle with others tell you about the client? Does he or she know that you know?</p> <p><i>Ambivalence (Explanation Models) Questions for the Client</i>                      "What is your theory about why change has been difficult for you?"                      "How have you tried to solve this and why have those efforts proved unsuccessful up until now?"                      "So, the problem is _____ and what you want is _____."</p> <p><i>Ambivalence (Change Models) Questions for the Client</i>                      "In what ways would it be good for you to (action)?"                      "If you did decide to change, how would you do it? What would be your reasons for doing something different?"                      "What are the good things about change and what are the not-so-good things?"</p>