



Let Go of Your Ego



To be an effective, engaging counselor, particularly when working with more challenging types of clients with lower levels of insight and motivation, it is essential to be able to put your personal ego to the side. In the counseling field, we as counselors want to be right with our viewpoints and decisions and with regard to our way of helping our clients work toward their goals. That is all well and good but when dealing with resistant clients, our viewpoints and decisions may often be challenged. This is particularly true when working with teenagers and young adults, as challenging authority is quite often part of these clients' developmental stage, so in actuality it is "normal" for young people to question their counselor's authority, perceptions, viewpoints and abilities. Therefore, if you are the type of person who is going to be sensitive about being challenged, argued with, defied, tested, provoked, etc. then you will surely have problems with the engagement process, especially with young people. Instead, counselors must learn to remember that it is not personal if someone challenges our knowledge, skill level or authority. Rather it is really "par for the course" and thus should be expected in difficult addiction and mental health treatment settings.

Therefore, to be effective at engagement, it is important to *check your ego at the door*. To be clear, what is meant by "ego" in this case is the need to feel important and to crave reverence or honor. This has nothing to do with respect, because both showing and receiving respect is essential in all kinds of relationships. Letting go of your ego in this instance is more about preparing yourself for some of the interpersonal challenges faced when working with your clients. Consider some of the various features involved with **letting go of your ego**:



Avoid Power Struggles: This concept is part of the "Counseling 101" basic rules however even though it seems so obvious, so often this simple rule is broken. Even when parenting toddlers we are taught to avoid power struggles whenever possible. Power struggles are toxic to the engagement process and just a little forethought ahead of time can prevent many of these potential showdowns. Some basic principles for avoiding power struggles with clients:



- Be clear and up front about rules and expectations – One of this biggest reasons why individuals violate rules, which can end up in a power struggle, is because they did not clearly know and understand the rules and expectations in the first place. It is always a good practice to review basic ground rules routinely in therapy sessions of all kinds, particularly in groups. A little bit of meaningful periodic repetition about expectations and guidelines for your program can be helpful (provided you avoid being obnoxious or “in your face” about rules and consequences which can backfire. Review the rules but at the same time, just be nice)
- Provide clear, calm warnings – The following example describes this concept very well. Suppose you have a legally mandated client who is very argumentative in your substance abuse group. This person already gave two positive urine screens and his probation officer has expressed that he is sending this guy back to court if there is one more, no matter what. You know that if this client tests positive again, he is going to beg, cry, scream, argue; whatever he can do, for another chance but there is nothing you can do because probation already drew the line in the sand and said that this is the last chance. In this example, it would be necessary to express a definitive and clear warning to the client that he has run out of chances with probation so there is no room left for discussion if there is another positive test. Let the client know beforehand, that no amount of begging, crying, pleading, hostility, deal making, etc. is going to change the situation if there is another positive urine screen in this case. This can save loads of stress on the back end if the client does test positive afterward. If that is the case and the client tested positive again after the clear warning then you can bypass the client’s attempt to instigate a fight or power struggle afterward because you already laid out your position ahead of time by providing a clear warning.
- Prepare for pitfalls – If you know ahead of time that a potentially difficult situation may come up, for instance you know ahead of time someone is going to have a positive urine screen and they may argue about it, then prepare ahead of time for that potential conflict. Perhaps have another counselor or intern ready to cover the group so you can pull that person aside if needed or do whatever it takes to be ready. Another example would be when you know there is a potential conflict brewing in group between two members. Better to be prepared and nothing happens than to be surprised and grasping for a solution in the heat of the moment. You cannot anticipate every problem but prepare for the ones that you can.
- Provide Choices – Cleverly providing a resistant client choices can be a “win-win” for a counselor because when this is done correctly the client is empowered to choose and you avoid the struggle. In Harm Reduction settings, counselors often have to use this technique. For example, suppose a client is coming in for abusing a variety of drugs which has caused some pretty severe life impairment. In your professional opinion and experience, you feel that total abstinence would be the cleanest and easiest way to tackle his overall substance abuse issues. Nevertheless, the client says to you “alcohol is legal, so I’ll stop the drugs but I am going to continue to drink on the weekends” Depending upon your level of rapport with the client, if you have a trusting relationship, a response such as “I don’t think drinking is a good idea for you based on your history of getting into trouble so I want to go on record that it’s probably not a great idea to keep drinking – but if you insist on drinking and if you do get into trouble we are going to have to consider a higher level of care if that happens” You nicely laid out a choice and now the ball is in the client’s court. If the clients decides to respect your opinion and stop drinking, that’s great. If the client decides to continue drinking in spite of your recommendation but miraculously is able to manage it without getting into trouble then conflict has been avoided and at least temporarily, everyone wins. If the client insists on drinking but eventually gets into more trouble, there still is a gain from this scenario as the conversation about drinking can be revisited with the client who (hopefully) will



see that drinking was a bad idea and agree to a needed higher level of care. The key point is that providing and discussing choices ahead of time is an effective way to avoid unnecessary power struggles.



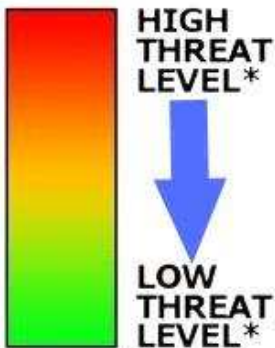
It's Not Personal - People are going to “get over” - Some substance abuse counselors find themselves becoming highly invested in “one-upping” their clients by trying to make themselves seem more “street smart”, wise, knowledgeable, clever, etc. than their clients. For these counselors, the idea of a client “getting over” may be personally intolerable to their ego. That kind of attitude can severely undermine the engagement process. One of the key goals of rapport building is to establish open and honest lines of communication. Rapport is abandoned when a counselor instead elects to establish a clinical relationship based on skepticism, cynicism and mistrust. In reality, no matter how street smart and slick a counselor may feel that he or she might be, sooner or later clients are going to fool you*. It is inevitable for everyone at all experience levels to be fooled, lied to and tricked on occasion in the substance abuse world. From a client engagement perspective it is often more valuable to let your clients know up front that you will be more tolerant if they come to you honestly about their mistakes as opposed to trying to get over with lies and deception. If clients choose to invest enough time and energy needed to be deceptive it is inevitable that from time to time they will pull it off. With that said however, there is a boundless amount of truth to the old wise adage that if someone is trying to fool others by lying, *“they are only fooling themselves”*. In fact it is appropriate to discuss this wise but true cliché with our client’s right up front. It is a sad but a time tested truth in the counseling profession that when someone plays deceitful games in the long run everyone loses. It is also helpful to discuss with clients that if they do somehow “get over” once by getting high and getting away with it without immediate consequences, if they keep it up, with time they will slip up and the consequences will catch up with them. It is a very difficult game that requires a lot of persistent effort for our clients to maintain a façade for any length of time. It is wise to be alert, cautious, and vigilant as a counselor but not to the degree where counseling and therapy is instead dominated and overwhelmed by ego-driven surveillance tactics, cunning maneuvers, outsmarting and “one-upmanship”.

*Keep in mind that the point being made here is not to suggest that counselors turn a blind eye to client’s efforts to be deceptive or dishonest. To the contrary, it would be irresponsible not to be highly vigilant with regard to keeping a close eye on client behaviors and attitudes. However the point is more about the counselor’s attitude and priorities. Keeping one’s eyes open to client deceptions is very important as a substance abuse counselor but it is also important to be realistic and not let this situation to monopolize the rapport-building and overall treatment process. As counselors we want to do our best to maintain integrity, honesty and accountability and of course safety in our programs however sadly there will always be clients who get over if they try hard enough.



Establishing an honest, “up-front” style of relationship with our clients from the start in a substance abuse setting can facilitate a more open and trusting relationship. This type of relationship fosters a lot more trust than the potential “cat and mouse” relationship that ensues when the counselor takes a more defensive stance of constantly trying to “catch’em in the act”. Simply put, if someone gets over, it is not personal. Lying, sneaking, cheating, etc. are unfortunate behaviors associated with substance abuse and addiction. Of course our job as counselors is to discourage these negative behaviors and encourage honesty and trust but that is a process. As counselors, we do not condone dishonesty but we should accept it as a reality that rarely changes overnight. Nor should a counselor feel ashamed if a client “gets over” with a form of deception on occasion as we all know that clients can be very clever when motivated to do so. Still, lying does not have to be tolerated nor should it be ignored. To the contrary, it is appropriate and recommended to respectfully address these deceptive situations directly as they arise. However, returning to the main topic, this section is about *attitude* and focus and the main point here is that clients getting over with lies and deception should be minimized where possible yet this should not exercise complete control over our efforts to be effective counselors. Your primary role is to be a counselor first, rather than allowing your ego to drive you to abandon good counseling skills to behave primarily like an agent using “FBI tactics”. Your main goal as counselor is to provide therapy, safety, support, guidance, inspiration, motivation and education as opposed to surveillance, profiling, investigation, interrogation, and counterintelligence. Later the topic of how to address a client who seems to be lying is revisited when discussing the concept of being “Respectfully Suspicious” This involves addressing concerns related to dishonesty in treatment by displaying our discernment and caution without using accusation or intimidation.

SEVERITY



Lower the “Threat Level” – This point coincides with the previous one. Lowering the threat level involves generating a certain type of feeling in your place of work to the degree in which you have an influence. The best way to explain this concept is to contrast a high threat level counseling environment with a lower threat level counseling program:

High Threat Level Program–

- Program element is primarily fear-based and punitive: Clients need to be highly invested in avoiding others learning about their setbacks, relapse and other forms of noncompliance or else face swift and decisive repercussions from counselors. Fear of discharge (and subsequent consequences of discharge) is used to shape client behavior. Client viewpoints that contradict program philosophy are seen as defiant or provocative. Clients often feel the need to be alert to avoid showing signs of weakness or struggle in order to prevent being perceived in a negative light by counselors with regard to their overall progress



Lower Threat Level –

- *Honest struggle is valued more than feigned compliance.* Setbacks and even relapse situations (though not condoned, as if to say “sure, go ahead and relapse) are viewed as part of the overall change process, provided that the client keeps on trying. Thus clients feel open to share about struggles, reservations, differing viewpoints, disagreements, fears and mistakes openly. Discussion and negotiation are counseling strategies for these client struggles rather than arguments or more authoritarian approaches by counselors and other staff. Consequences are followed through with but only to the degree appropriate for each individual client situation on a case by case basis while taking into account client’s overall effort level and past progress. Consequences are never arbitrary or based on rigid expectations. Rather, effort is made to be encouraging and reasonable wherever possible

Basically, lowering the threat level is exactly what it sounds like. Clients should not feel threatened by your approach or your counseling program atmosphere. Treatment should not feel anything like jail or a prison camp in any level of care. At times an entire culture change is needed at some agencies to create an improved environment for engagement and honest rapport building. Even when there are a lot of mandated clients in a treatment program, the program itself does not need to have the “feel” of a correctional program. Treatment should be nonthreatening and accepting

“Ego trip: a journey to nowhere” – Robert Half



This article flows directly into the Engagement Tool - [Be Positive](#)



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