

Psychological Helping Relationships: Psychological Counseling and Psychotherapy

What is a psychological helping relationship?

It is a peculiar relationship which takes place between one or more psychologists and one or more clients (or patients), who turn to those professionals in order to receive help for their psychological, and sometimes psycho-corporeal, concerns.

The relationship is based upon a contract, both in oral and in written form, proposed by the professional and freely accepted by the client/patient, and on the skills offered by the professional. The contract acts as a way to guarantee the helping relationship's clearness between the parties, especially regarding its goal and duration. It is then a non equal relationship, where a psychologist, a professional, provides a service, which is the same helping relationship, in exchange for money. In no case, this relationship has to be mistaken with a friendly or loving relationship, even though, and this is desirable, in it can occur loving exchanges.

Every overcoming of the boundaries established by the relationship is a setting violation (meaning by "setting" the set of rules, the physical space and the time on which the relationship is rooted). The following are the main rules established in a psychological setting: duration and frequency of the sessions; payment mode; cancellation of a session; contacts outside the setting; privacy; end of the treatment. These rules are communicated or established with the client/patient at the beginning or during the treatment. Seven basic helping forms are possible: 1) giving information; 2) direct action; 3) teaching and guidance; 4) changing systems; 5) defence; 6) feedback and 7) facilitation. Within the helping relationships, Counseling is a type of facilitation, while Psychotherapy is primarily a changing system, and sometimes a kind of teaching and guidance.

Counselor as a helping relationship facilitator

To facilitate means "to help individuals in overcoming the obstacles to their personal growth, wherever they might be" (APA) and it is "an empowerment process, conceived for helping an individual in accepting his own life as it is and finally in reaching maturity through learning the responsibility assumption and the autonomous decision making" (Anne Jones). A facilitator does not evaluate, does not give support, does not interpret, does not investigate and does not give solution.

According to the Italian Encyclopedia "Treccani", "within psychotherapy, and particularly referring to maladjustment cases and to non severe psychological diseases, Counseling is a kind of intervention in which a professional directly discusses with the client/patient about his concerns and difficulties of adaptation, proposes tests and advises alternative behaviors".

Counseling is an activity of relational skill through communicational means aimed to facilitate self-knowledge through the awareness and an optimal development of personal resources in order to improve one's lifestyle in a more satisfactory and creative way. Besides, it allows to resolve with self-determination specific problems of decisional aspects and favours self-change and improvement of one's relational skills.

Counseling turns both to people suffering from corporeal, psychosomatic, psychological diseases and to people who struggle against existential problems of the everyday life

(conflicts, breaking, loneliness, illness, mourning, depression, unemployment, helplessness) or even, in a wider sense, to any person or group who is searching for a better expression of their own latent potential. Counseling, in other words, allows one to become aware of those inner mechanisms that often push towards negative recursive behavior, developmental blockage, avoidance, anxiety and conflict. It aims not only to explain the source of difficulties, but also to facilitate the experience of the path towards new solutions and to stimulate a creative adaptation of the organism within its environment.

Psychological Counseling provides as well activities of orientation, support, prevention, diagnosis, rehabilitation and pertains solely to the psychologist.

Psychotherapy as a personality transformation intervention

Differently from the psychological intervention, Psychotherapy works on the deep psychical structures, in order to produce their transformation. The psychotherapist is a professional provided with a basic training in a certain approach, with its proper methods and techniques, and with a specific vision of human individuality as well. The following are considered to be areas of psychotherapeutic intervention: discomfort, psychical suffering and pathological diseases connected to the structure of personality. Sometimes the areas of Counseling and Psychotherapy overlap, but, while the former refers to growth, prevention and development of personality, educational concerns and professional orientation, the latter deals with the complexity of intrapsychic functioning at a deep level and therefore requires an intensive commitment and a more in-depth professional training as well.