Establishing a Relationship with Families
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Brief Overview

It has been noted that the counseling relationship accounts for fully thirty percent of client progress (Lambert, 1992). In Working with Families Across Counseling Specialties, Kaplan (in press) theorizes that this amount is even higher when a client’s family is involved. Why? Because families are more wary of a counselor than are individuals. They will often challenge your authority and power at the beginning and it is your responsibility to establish a relationship under these circumstances. A family that remains distrustful of the counselor will not allow progress.

There are many things that a counselor can do to establish a positive therapeutic relationship with families before, during, and after each session. The practitioner must be mindful of the proper ways to; get the family into his or her office, dress appropriately for the session, display professional credentials, provide a comfortable seating arrangement, obtain informed consent, and conduct the first session in such a way as to increase the likelihood that subsequent sessions will occur when necessary. Establishing rapport and a relationship with clients is only the first step in counseling, but it is one that can set the tone for the therapeutic experience.

Discussion

Getting the family into your office

It may be stating the obvious, but you can’t establish a relationship with a family that won’t come for counseling in the first place (Kaplan, in press). Therefore, it is most helpful to devise a plan to encourage a client’s family members to come to the sessions. The key is to identify the family member who has the greatest power and enlist his or her aid in getting every family member to come to the first session.

Dress

You may want to consider the more formal side of dress when you have a family appointment. This applies even when you have been wearing informal attire during a client’s individual appointments. Dressing formally serves two purposes when you first meet the family members of a client. First, it is a sign of respect. Second, dressing formally gives the message that you are an expert. And, that is exactly what a family wants, an expert. They do not want to waste their time or, worse, have family members and relationships hurt by a counselor who does not know what he or she is doing.

Credentials

When a family is waiting for a session to begin, they should be able to view your graduate diploma(s), license and any professional certifications. Kent (1997) points out that it is also useful to have a one page waiting room resume which states your qualifications and strengths and includes a listing of credentials, experience, professional affiliations, publications, and presentations. Providing this information in the waiting room allows you to begin to establish credibility (and therefore trust) with a family even before they enter your office for the first time.

Seating

Try to set up your office so that it is comfortable for individual counseling yet can also accommodate a family of five. That will take care of most of your seating needs. It is useful to have some folding chairs stored in an easily accessible location for those times when you bring in a large family or invite grandparents or other extended family members into your office. Don’t settle for basic card-table metal folding chairs. Comfortable and attractive padded folding chairs are available through furniture stores and office furniture catalogs. Periodically, you may want to invite more than seven or eight relatives into your office. In that case, you can go into your group counseling seating mode and set up circled chairs in a bigger group counseling room.

Informed consent

Informed consent has been a recent focus in the field of family counseling ethics. Here, the issue is using informed consent to help establish and enhance your relationship with a family. Focusing on informed consent at your first contact with a family helps establish a relationship because it establishes trust. A family that “knows what it is getting into” is more likely to take the risk of investing themselves in a partnership with you (Borden, 1975).

The first session

The first session is extremely important because it can be a determinant of whether succeeding sessions will occur. Because of this, the first session can be very anxiety provoking. A few key points may help to lessen this anxiety. First, the family should be allowed to seat themselves before the counselor sits down. Second, obtain informed consent. Third, take some time to get to know the family. Finally, many counselors find it helpful to offer a summary of the session, an interpretation of feelings brought out in the session, and to inquire about the worth of the session to the family.

Recommended Course of Action

Obtaining informed consent is one of the most important aspects of establishing a relationship with families. The authors see it as so important that they believe that it needs to be reiterated. Kaplan (2000) provides a seven-step process for gaining informed consent in a way that enhances trust and a relationship with a family:

- First, construct a thorough informed consent brochure. It should contain headings on confidentiality, your theoretical framework and treatment approach, your
educational background and training, information on how to make and break appointments, session (and other) charges and fees, any additional points pertinent to your practice, and an acknowledgement page (Zuckerman & Guyett, 1992).

- The second step in obtaining informed consent with a family is to ask them to read your informed consent brochure before the first session. This helps establish a relationship before you even see the family because it demonstrates that you are open and want to provide helpful information.

- Third, ask the family for feedback on your informed consent brochure at the beginning of the first session. The question may also be raised about whether you will see family members individually. Before you say yes to this request, please read step four; reviewing your rules about confidentiality.

- Fourth, take the time to review your rules about confidentiality. Since confidentiality is considered the cornerstone ethic, it should be reviewed with the entire family.

- The fifth step in utilizing informed consent to establish a relationship with a family is to have all family members sign the acknowledgement sheet. This provides written confirmation that each family member has had the chance to review the rules of your practice.

- Sixth, give the informed consent brochure to the family to take home after you have removed the demographic form(s) and the signed acknowledgement sheet. This builds trust and enhances the counselor/family relationship because it demonstrates that you want the family to be able to refer to your practice rules at any time.

- The final step is to ask about the informed consent brochure at the beginning of the second family session. I typically state, “Now that everyone has had a chance to more leisurely review my informed consent brochure, were there any additional questions about what I do or the rules of my practice?” This shows a continuing desire to earn the trust of the family.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Though a mental health practitioner may have a specialty or a population that he or she prefers, a well-rounded and well-respected counselor is going to have to deal with a wide variety of populations and issues. Family counseling, or at least being able to bring in a family member or two to an individual session, may be potentially beneficial for many clients.

The preceding paragraphs have offered a very brief overview of just some of the ways to conduct a session with a family. This is by no means an exhaustive list for the how, what, or why of family counseling. For additional suggestions and a more extensive explanation of those already given, one might want to read *Working with Families Across Counseling Specialties* (in press).

**References**


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