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The Body as Evidence: Helping Clients Identify Decision-making Roadblocks

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ABSTRACT

Grad school or Europe for a year? A highly motivated, fourth-year liberal arts student makes her decision but still has doubts. What roles do emotion and a client's personal history play in career counselling? The case study utilizes experiential process to uncover decision-making roadblocks.

RÉSUMÉ

Etudes supérieures ou l'Europe pour l'année prochaine? Un étudiant d'arts libéraux hautement motivé prend sa décision mais elle semble encore toujours avoir des doutes. Que rôle jouent l'émotion et l'histoire personnelle d'un client dans le counselling de carrière? Une étude de cas dans l'utilisation du processus expérimental pour dévoiler les barrages routiers de prise de décision

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RELEVANT BACKGROUND HISTORY

"You probably get this all of the time. I can't decide whether to do the Europe thing after grad," 21-year-old Julie pondered aloud in her first session at a university career counselling centre. Quietly passionate, this fourth-year human rights major presented as intelligent, personable, altruistic, and achievement-minded. She appeared happy and well-adjusted, free of the typical struggles with misfitting majors, failed midterms, and squabbling roommates. Most of Julie's background was unremarkable. She had no history of suicide, substance abuse, or physical/mental illness. Academically and socially well adjusted, she was an active "A" student, had close friends, and dated occasionally. The oldest of four children, she came from a family that was close even before her Mom passed away when Julie was 15.

Julie was very engaged in counselling. She researched graduate programs and potential employers, and confidently conducted information interviews with other professionals. By session 5 she had virtually made her decision. Despite this progress, however, she was reluctant to terminate, saying that she would "need another session or two." This stance appeared out of character with her independent nature.

PRESENTING ISSUES

Julie's presenting issue was whether to take a year off to travel before doing her master's as well as deciding on which program. She mentioned "feeling old" and being tempted to "ditch off to Europe" because "you're only young once." A self-described "planner," she was also "practical." Having put herself through school, she didn't want to end up in a "McJob." She felt lucky that her family would support her no matter what she did. "And besides, I left home a few years ago anyway."

THEORETICAL APPROACH UTILIZED

The approach utilized was existentialism, with life meaning explored via experiential emotional and cognitive processing.

INTERVENTIONS

Previous interventions were mainly career-focused. They included (a) exploring goals, (b) psycho-education regarding the process of career decision-making, (c) practice in information interviewing, and (d) career testing. Julie opened session 5 with, "I've made up my mind. I'm definitely going to do immigration law at either University of Toronto or Osgoode." "I've found the perfect compromise," she added. "Instead of working the summer, I'll just ditch off to Europe. I wouldn't be a real student without a little debt, now would I?" she joked.

However, Julie's subtly clenched jaw and furrowed brow didn't support her proclaimed relief at figuring it all out. My failed attempt to celebrate and terminate confirmed my instinct as she politely requested another session or two to "work out the details." I wasn't sure where to go. We'd done most of the traditional career interventions and Julie retreated whenever sessions gravitated to the personal sphere. My sense was that, deep down, she wanted to take the full year to go to Europe. However, I was mindful of respecting her conclusions and careful not to bias her choice.

Drawing on previous client experience, I sought Julie's permission to do a combined visualization-focusing exercise to explore my hypothesis. I asked her to close her eyes and visualize a fork in the road of her life path. I suggested that she take two walks in her mind: one down the path of grad school and another to Europe. "Start with any path you like; jump back and forth if you like. Only talk aloud if you feel like it," I suggested. Her body immediately relaxed and within 30 seconds she spoke in a very real, uncensored manner. She started down the path of grad school. She walked really far, nearly making it to graduation when she suddenly vocalized "feeling sick to [her] stomach" at the thought of "being all grown-up and jumping on the adult treadmill for life," despite having her dream job as lawyer.

Circling back to her body language, I gently pointed out how her face tensed up whenever she talked about grad school. I continued, "So what do you feel in your body when you think about going to Europe? Going to grad school?" After focusing on her body, she reported feeling warm all over regarding the Europe

trip but that she couldn't ignore the "headache" in her brain that said she "should" do grad school.

"Whose voice is that?" I wondered aloud. Upon exploration, this "should" was not societally prescribed. Julie was "OK with being different." Unexpectedly, she interjected, "Mom always said I was the 'smart one.'" She opened her eyes and continued, "I know (pointing to her head), Mom wouldn't want me to not waste my youth, especially after what happened to her. But, I still feel guilty. I'm the role model ... the big sister." Until now, I had not extensively explored family-of-origin issues with Julie since she had told me earlier that she was close to them.

OUTCOME

Julie responded to her sudden moment of insight. Within minutes of exploring her attachment history and early parentification, she quickly pronounced that she was indeed going to Europe and would not need next week's session. "But I reserve the right to come back if I chicken out," she said. Post-case written feedback confirmed the value of an experiential, emotion-focused approach. "It really helped to talk about things I'd never told anyone before. I didn't think all [of] that mattered for grad school."

The literature increasingly supports the role of both family of origin and emotions in career decision-making (Chope, 2005). Lara (2007, p. 153) describes the powerful role of "emotions elicited by family expectations, history, and legacy" as one follows the script of "the way we try to please our family." Emmerling and Cherniss (2003) challenge the view that emotions cloud decisions, noting that the decision-making literature reveals that emotion linked with cognition produces consistently better outcomes. The more limited research on emotion in career decision-making suggests that emotions influence risk perceptions as well as career-exploration behaviours. Tansley, Jome, Haase, and Martens (2007) demonstrate that negative emotions from feared loss situations (e.g., fear of regret) evoke an action tendency toward greater career exploration. Finally, Brown et al.'s (2003) meta-analysis of career choice interventions is notably silent on the role of family and emotions in career counselling, suggesting future directions for research.

References

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About the Author

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