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EFFECTIVELY HANDLING SILENCE IN COUNSELING GROUPS

ABSTRACT: Periods of silence in counseling groups may be productive or nonproductive for individual members. They occur primarily because of counselor ineptitude arising out of false beliefs regarding the nature of group counseling. Counselors who clearly understand that the group does not exist, only each member does, and that interventions must be tailored to helping each work on his or her concerns and achieve his or her personal counseling goals, are the ones who will find no difficulty in dealing with group silence periods. Specific constructive counselor behaviors are presented for dealing with silence in counseling groups. Group counselor effectiveness is stressed throughout.

In many counseling groups, periods of silence are frequent, almost as though the members have in consort stubbornly decided to use this tactic as a means of resisting the counseling process. Why such silent periods occur, their relative character and value, and how an effective counselor of groups can productively deal with them are the subjects of this discussion. Silence in groups is a common phenomenon, but it would be less common if group counselors were truly understanding of its nature and more skilled in manifesting effective leader behaviors which dispel it.

It is possible to conceive of a period of group silence as a special strategy which, while not introduced by the counselor, is permitted to endure because the counselor sees it as a behavioral data-gathering opportunity. There are many individuals who are self-punishingly incapable of being silent in the company of others and this very in-

capability frequently reveals a network of neurotic thinking and verbal behavior which can be productively worked on once it is revealed and comprehended. A long period of silence in a group might provide an onerous endurance test, having the result of nudging certain kinds of unwanted behavior to the forefront which may then receive counseling focus. Group participants may thus explore their characteristic ways of dealing with being in close proximity with others who are choosing not to talk. But beyond this, there is little value in all group members being simultaneously still. At any given present moment in a group *most* members *are* silent. It hardly takes an all-be-silent test to flush out a compulsive talker.

Silence as a test device has no more credibility than does any similar conditional factor induced into the group environment which might flush out other kinds of behaviors debilitating to some individuals. Ought a counselor to conduct sessions in total darkness in order to learn which members ineffectively deal with darkness? Or in a sauna to learn who deals well or poorly with excessive heat? Or in a walk-in refrigerator? Or in a room where loud noise continually grates from a record player? Most members are aware of life conditions with which they have difficulty coping and these tend to come out during the course of the counseling.

Certainly not all silent periods are unproductive. There are times when natural closure on some phase of counseling activity occurs with all members choosing not to talk, when silence constitutes a kind of rest and produces a balancing effect after what may have been heavy emotion-laden exchanges. It allows members to return to homeostasis to contemplate what has gone on, to mull over whatever was important to them in the experience, and to reorder their thoughts without having to attend to any new business, without having any stimulus to participate directed at them.

But here again such silent periods need be few. Any given member who requires time for reordering his or her thinking, for mulling over this or that, or for whatever reason, can choose not to participate verbally in the ongoing group activity.

Non-productive silence can take the form of unspoken agreement among members "to go against" the leader, refusing to move in directions a leader might indicate for reasons of fear, unwillingness to participate in a group structured in a manner different from what was expected, or due to authority-figure resistance. But such "ganging up" on the leader is seldom the case; the greater likelihood is that one by one each member hangs back because she or he is not ready to "play the heavy," to become the one on whom the group focus turns.

Many novice group counselors find silent periods to be intimidating, principally because they have been so conditioned by their own social experience to feel anxious when the talk stops, since the expectation and desire is that talk is what a group convenes to make, be it at a party, a dinner, a committee meeting, or whatever human gathering. People talk to each other, that is the norm. Part of the meaning of being human is communication with other humans. Such novice counselors feel that talk-noise, regardless of content, is preferable to

silence, and they are readily emboldened in this mind-set by group members who are similarly conditioned. As a consequence, in some groups nonproductive talking which has little to do with effective counseling is encouraged or permitted. Rather than suffer the silence this becomes a group time when small talk is tolerated or "topics" are introduced. Such avoidance of silence is hardly the most efficient use of the counseling time and in many groups constitutes a silence corollary more troublesome than the silence itself.

Effective group counselors simply remind themselves that silence is merely another form of human behavior, that anyone has a right not to talk, that this behavior, like any other, is caused, and that the causes are not necessarily the same for identical behavior as it is manifested in any two individuals. Why Eric is silent may have nothing in it akin to why Frieda is. The effective group counselor is immune to the pressure to talk, however much some group members might feel anxious or oppressed by the lack of verbal exchange, and such is a first step in dealing with silence, whether it be just a short respite or a lengthy contemplative time period for all the group members. For a counselor to feel threatened is to be rendered ineffective. The second step involves the counselor's not being the perpetual silence breaker, being free of dominating compulsion, open to many options, able to allow members to take the initiative. As the silence continues, the effective counselor steadily uses the time by checking out each person. Who is nervous, semicomatose, tittery? Who seems intimidated? Who keeps glancing from member to member, looking for someone else to make it end? Who is tuned out, trudging down personal mind paths? Who appears ready to say something but cannot muster the courage to let it out? The counselor is not inactive. Silence is data-gathering time. It is a time to model the notion that there is nothing inappropriate in all members simultaneously falling quiet; the counselor displays neither alarm nor disappointment.

Following an interruption of the silence by one or more of the members themselves, the group counselor, rather than ignoring its presence, might allude to it with a statement such as what follows:

That we will be silent from time to time is something that we can expect to happen. Most of you are not accustomed to talking about yourselves in a setting such as this. You can use some times to think about what has taken place and to decide if and how you want to participate. No expectations exist that we will find it necessary to have perpetual noise going on in the group. Rather, it is more reasonable to expect that there will be recurring inactive times. If you find a silent period to be uncomfortable, you can talk about that here in the group. We can examine how such a time is valuable or unproductive and think through how the focus might be shifted.

This kind of helpful statement is in contrast to one where the group leader berates the members:

If you want to waste time by not participating, that is up to you. Silence is patently an unproductive way to take up group time, but I'm not going to force anyone to talk.

Such an approach increases the formidability of silent intervals and

drives group members into deeper reluctance to talk: it challenges members to exercise stubbornness. Such a leader has inferred, "It is your fault, group members, and I am critical of your behavior."

The paramouncy of silent periods in a counseling group to the point of their being chronic, an impediment to counseling progress, can be laid directly at the feet of the counselor. Such a one is usually a believer in a number of group-counseling myths and behaves in accordance with them:

1. That it is not the counselor who is responsible for what transpires in the group, but the members.
2. That the group is an entity apart from the individuals who make it up, having a "collective mind," as it were.
3. That members are sufficiently skilled to behave in ways leading to their own self-help.
4. That a group must go through stages and work out difficulties as the tenure of the group continues.
5. That group counseling involves a mysterious process. People benefit from group membership in ways remote from the ways they might benefit from individual counseling.

These myths have common coinage in the group-counseling world, but such does not make them any less mythological. Each will be discussed in turn, while keeping in mind how a belief in the myth determines ineffective counselor functioning as it relates to any period of group silence that can be characterized as a barrier to effectiveness (for other group-counseling barriers, see Dyer & Vriend, 1975).

1. Unless they are instructed otherwise (or they have happened into some encounter or sensitivity group setting: see Vriend & Dyer, 1973), members do not join a counseling group expecting to take responsibility for what transpires. Such responsibility belongs to the counselor, the avowed expert. Group counselors convene the groups and offer their services. Their services ought to include enough expertise so that skill and competency delivery can be assured. The goals in a counseling group are for individual member behavioral self-change in his or her life outside the group; no group goals exist. How a counselor who orchestrates the group process will help members to achieve such goals, how counselor and members will function in the group to arrive at such ends for each member, ought to be something the group counselor can articulate, can explain at the outset of the group. The skilled group counselor knows how to change silence into productive activity and has a rationale for each in-group behavior he or she manifests. The skilled group counselor has a repertoire of procedural options to draw upon in any instance of nonproductive group silence, a characterization which she or he takes responsibility for determining based on reality data and mature judgment.

2. The group as a separate entity, one of greater importance than the members who comprise it, is a myth of the first order, one damaging to group counseling effectiveness in myriad ways. In essence there is no *group*, the abstraction we apply to the collectivity. There are only individual people who are in the same life-space circle. One plus one plus one plus one never adds up to two or more. This is a crucial understanding, too frequently overlooked when the subject is

discussed in the literature on groups. Thus, the "group" is *never* silent: only Marie, Carl, George, Mary, Jane, or however many individuals who make up the group, one by one, are silent, and even when there is lively interaction going on, most individuals are not talking. While one talks, all others are silent. Seldom do two or more persons talk simultaneously. For a group not to be silent, it requires that only one member talk. Always aware of this, the effective counselor need not make appeals to the group as an entity: any individual in the group can be engaged and therein lies the secret to limiting silent periods and promoting productivity.

3. The group counselor who has decided ahead of time that members have the same or greater social skills than she or he has, or that members ought to know what the experience they are entering is like, certainly is taking too much for granted. Members learn what the process is like by experiencing it, and in the early phases of group life, especially, they cannot be relied upon to be effective helpers for each other. The counselor is the behavioral model, the trend-setter. To the extent that members learn helping behaviors, they are taught by the effective counselor, the one person in the group who *ought* to know what to do, who can and does demonstrate such, and who positively reinforces productive helping behaviors when they arise in others. When all fall silent, the burden for dealing with the phenomenon belongs to the counselor, not to any member or members in consort, therefore. The counselor who attempts to rupture the silence by asking, "Why are we silent?" misses the point and reinforces a notion that, when perpetuated, can result in a group malaise, members feeling vaguely guilty because they lack some expertise which they ought to have acquired somewhere in life. The counselor who gets this answer to such a question: "Because no one is talking," has earned it.

4. Group workers who are convinced that groups go through stages, however delineated: exploratory stage, struggle-for-power stage, transition stage, getting-down-to business stage, culmination stage, or whatever, have been paying attention to group dynamics principles garnered from research about people in groups wherein no effective group counselor was present. Given a passive leader or a leader who operates only as a facilitator or player/coach, a group of people will engage in such normatively predictable ways. But in a counseling group none of these stages need exist, provided the counselor knows what to do and does it. With a passive leader, an abdicator, the advent of group silence escalates, and the greater the passivity, the more predictable (particularly in groups lacking compulsive talkers) such silent periods are.

5. There are many things to be said about group counseling which differentiate it from individual counseling, but all of these refer to reality factors, not to any mystery. Group counseling denotes the counseling of individuals in a group setting. Individuals get counseled, not some entity called a "group" which has no life apart from the persons who make it up. Counseling individuals in a group heightens the impact because there are interested and concerned witnesses and because the counseling resources are enlarged by the number of people who

make up the group. People benefit in the same ways in group counseling that they do in one-to-one counseling, except that the former is more potent; exploration and identification of counseling focal areas, goal-setting, role-working techniques, contracting, every counseling procedure becomes more heightened in a group, more impactful and telling, and dealing with silence is no exception. Thus, the effective counselor never loses sight of the fact that he or she has individual clients only, even though they convene together to receive the counseling help.

This one reality is the chief source of productive silence-breaking interventions in which an effective counselor might engage. Each member of the group is there to be individually counseled, to receive particular personal help, is in competition for counseling focus, is different from everyone else in the group, lives in a different, totally unique world, has had a totally unique life history, has her or his individual desires for behavioral change. When the group is silent, the effective counselor thinks about each member as being separate from the others, as being individualistic in the decision not to participate, and as the individuals in the group are studied and thought about, silence-breaking interventions occur to such a counselor in abundance:

. . . Terry, what's going on in your head right now?

. . . Jenny, earlier you indicated that you wanted to work on your compulsiveness to be super-organized. Now might be a good time for you to go into that.

. . . Maynard, you haven't said a word since the group started today. Are you feeling out of it? Has there been anything going on to which you can relate?

. . . Two weeks ago, Carl, we took up a great deal of time going into your relationship with your Dad. Maybe you could tell us what's happened on that front since that time?

. . . Mary, it is hard to recall your ever having been so quiet. Are you working on some goals related to not talking, maybe trying to be a better observer and listener?

. . . At the first group session, Emil, you indicated that you were not exactly sure how you could use the group. Where are you now?

. . . Watching you, Melody, one would get the impression that you are terrifically bored, but that you don't quite know what to do about it.

The examples could be endlessly multiplied. Each arises out of what the counselor knows about a given member and has behind it a helping rationale and plan for further counseling movement.

Beyond such interventions, effective leaders have a repertoire of group structures that are known to be productive exercises in which a group might engage. When silence has become chronic and is seen as a barrier to counseling progress, and no one in the group circle responds to the counselor's extended invitational hand to help a person go to work on personal concerns, few times could be more propitious for introducing a special exercise or structure designed to involve each and every member, one which has a proven history to recommend it, whether it be a feedback exercise, a goal-declaration procedure, group process analysis, or whatever (see Dyer & Vriend, 1975, for a specification of nineteen such strategies and structures).

In the final analysis, silence can hardly be seen as a concern for any counselor of groups who understands what is going on, is not threatened by it, and knows that effectiveness depends on his or her enlightened intervening. In a group, when silence is not "golden," something can be done about it.

RESUME: Les périodes de silence en counseling de groupe peuvent être productives ou non pour certains membres. Ces périodes sont principalement dues à l'ineptie du conseiller qui entretient de fausses croyances concernant la nature du counseling de groupe. Les conseillers qui savent clairement que seuls les membres existent, et non le groupe, et que chaque intervention doit être ajustée aux préoccupations et aux objectifs personnels de chaque individu sont ceux qui n'éprouveront aucune difficulté à faire face aux périodes de silence. On illustre des comportements constructifs spécifiques pour traiter le silence dans les groupes de counseling. On souligne l'efficacité du counselor de groupe du début à la fin.

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