

The meaning of counselling from the client's perspective: a qualitative study of client experiences of therapy in two voluntary sector agencies

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Crossreach Counselling (Lothians) Tom Allan Centre (Glasgow)

- Established 1986
- Over 1100 new clients each year
- Average 8-10 sessions
- 60% women clients; 40% men
- Clients from all backgrounds
- Over 130 counsellors
(70% trained, 30% in training)
- Initial training of counsellors

Aims of the study

- To explore how clients understand and evaluate the outcomes of counselling
- To contribute to the development of 'grassroots' research, carried out by front-line practitioners

Background in Previous Research

- The client/service user's perspective
- Capture the client's voice/experience
- What clients find helpful/hindering in counselling.
- Client experiences of the outcomes of counselling
(key references in handout)

Distinctive aspects of this study

- Use of time-line to track client trajectory
- Interviewer notes own emotional response to interviewee
- Use of change Interview (Elliott)
- Visual representation of findings
- Multiple researchers

METHOD

- Clients asked if they could be contacted after end of therapy
- 6-12 months post-therapy; completed ethical consent form
- Interviews lasted for 1-2 hours.
- Coded for themes (grounded theory approach)
- Themes organised into a narrative summary for each case
- Each coding and summary audited by at least one other member of the group
- Narrative summaries compared by lead researcher – presented preliminary analysis to group
- Further refinement of analysis through dialogue in group

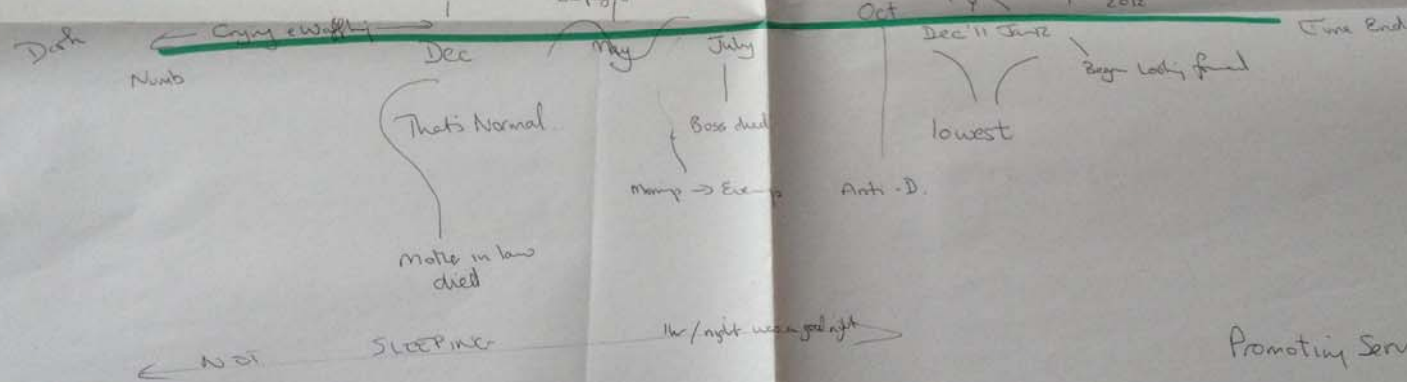
EXAMPLE OF AN INTERVIEW TIME-LINE

E002

Pains
 Pains
 Sorely
 and
 stuff

Appl of Friends - supportive
 Help - Neutral pos - to be to

Husband's Death May 10
 Oct 10
 Eureka Moment!
 write on computer
 22 pages



Practical help - coping with panic
 Awareness of being hard - grief
 Coping Mechanism
 more stubbornness
 why don't you use your stubbornness
 2012 'year of resituting'

SAMPLE

- 20 clients
- Age: 21-70
- 15 women, 5 men
- Number of sessions: 5-72
- Each case given a title – ‘analyst’, ‘young mother’, ‘artist’, ‘nanny’

SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

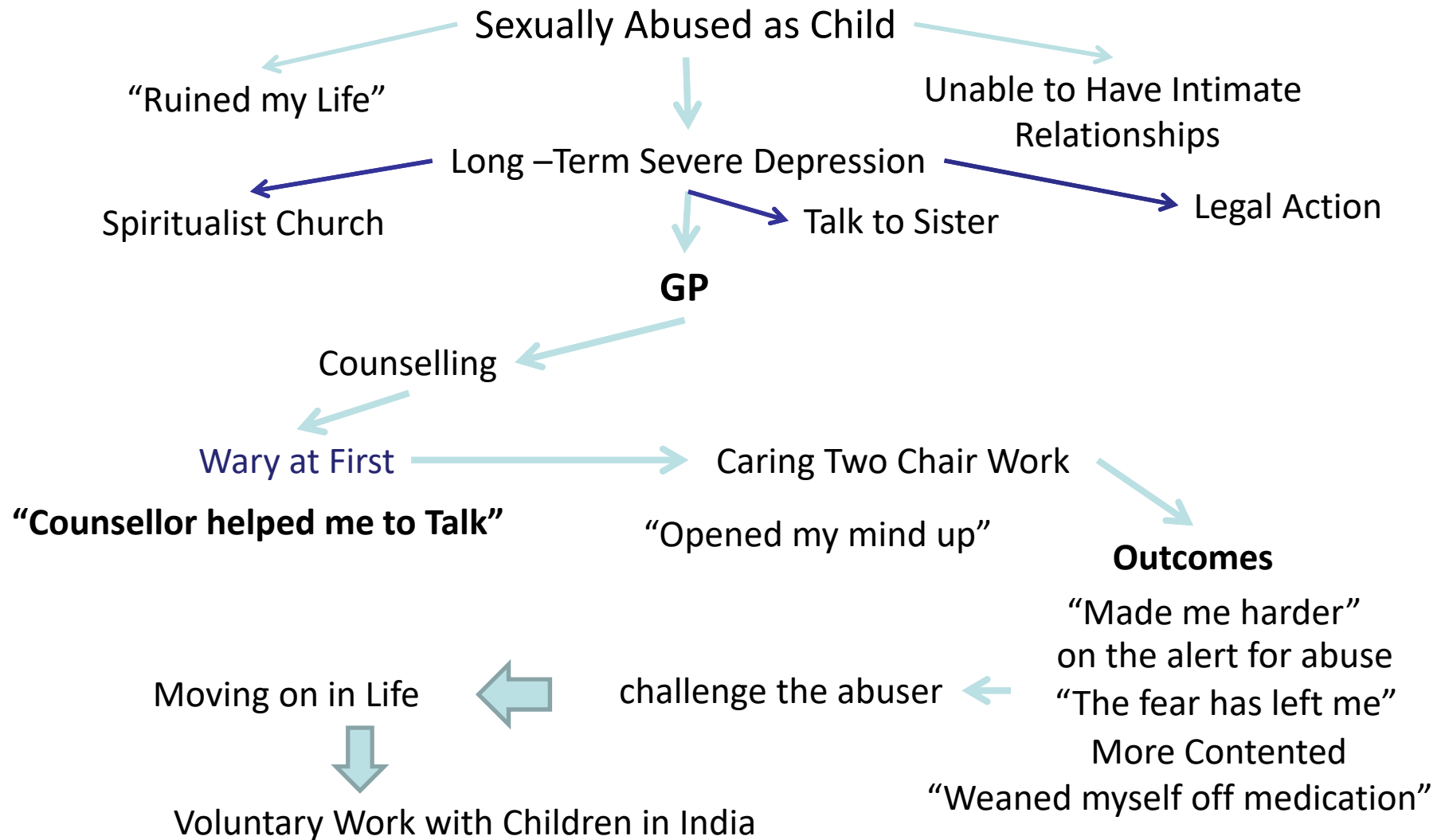
- All participants satisfied and appreciative
- Good outcome – 16 clients
- Mixed outcome – 4 clients

- Artist : *“Often in my prayers you know if she came into my mind , I would say 'thank you for the help and I hope you're ok”*

- Young Business Woman : *“I suppose I think it's quite nice really to think about the progress that I have made, compared when I came in. I did find the whole process very helpful and supportive and very grateful for it.”*

EXAMPLES OF CLIENT TRAJECTORIES THROUGH THERAPY

Transformational Change of Life-Long Problem



The Analyst

Life Crisis

Death of Husband

Has Been Very Close

5 Months Later

“Desperation Point”

“Numb” – “In a Bubble” Lack of Sleep Depression/Anxiety/Panic Unable to Fulfill Work Tasks

Friend Recommended Counselling

Reluctant to Try It

70 Sessions

“Eureka Moments”

Someone to listen

Facing Darkness Within

Anti-Depressants

Further Losses

Outcomes:

Being Able to Ask for Help

Normalising

Positive Attitude

Coping Strategies

Functioning at Work



**Continuing to Move
Forward, Although
It Is Hard**

The Support Worker

Long-Term Post-Viral Fatigue Syndrome

Upsetting, Disrupted Life



Good Social Support
Nature
Faith

Previous Experience of Therapy

Positive about Entering Counselling

20 Sessions

Counsellor Was Calm and Accepting



Made Sense of Difficult Childhood
Experiences (Disability)

Improved Relationship
with Sister

More Caring of
Self

No "Cure" for Post-Viral Fatigue Although some Improvement



Exploring Further Avenues

SELECTED CROSS-CASE THEMES

Theme 1: The counselling agency as a stable and known presence within a local network of care

- Most clients contacted the agency following recommendations from trusted other
- Clients described the counselling centre as a safe place to be – felt taken care of – trusted their counsellor

THEME 2: why/how counselling helped

High degree of consistency across participants

- Safety and confidentiality
- Someone who genuinely cares about me
- Being helped to talk and express my feelings
- Flexibility and responsiveness
- Most clients valued creative interventions
- Having enough time to go at own pace

THEME 3: actively seeking help and support from a variety of sources

- All clients reported pre-counselling and concurrent use of other helping resources.
- In general, these resources were not suggested or initiated by the counsellor

THEME 4: Elements of outcome

- Bursting the Bubble
- The Jigsaw Effect
- The L'Oreal Factor (because your worth it!)
- The Pinocchio Phenomenon
- May the Force be with you

Elements of outcome, cont.

- Shift in emotional landscape
- Re-organising life/making decisions
- Using new coping skills and strategies
- Finding a voice

CONCLUSIONS

Importance of Context:

- The meaning or perceived value of an episode of counselling depends on where it fits into the person's life as a whole
- The reputation of the counselling agency facilitates trust
- The helpfulness of counselling depends in part on the availability of other sources of learning and support within the community

CONCLUSIONS

The distinctiveness of “counselling” as a form of help:

- A safe space
- Flexible and responsive
- Caring
- Dialogue
- Creative techniques and strategies
- Affirmation of “person-centred” values
- Non-medicalised

POSSIBLE AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- look at what happens in poor outcome cases
- effect of providing clients with more information at the start of therapy
- the therapeutic effect of taking part in a follow-up interview
- the impact on counsellor practice and development, of taking part in research
- the interviewer's response to the client, as a source of data