Core Conditions and Carl Rogers

Sometimes, we can feel ourselves powerless to help clients because they seem so overwhelmed with their pain and we aren't able to make it go away. As caring people, it is natural for us to experience feelings of distress. There can sometimes be a tendency to DO something - “don’t just sit there, DO something”. In that respect we want to take control, like a doctor, or an expert, and prescribe some pill or therapy that will “cure” the client’s pain.

Enter Carl Rogers . . .

Carl Rogers is the father of Person Centred Counselling, the basis of all the work we do with our clients on the telephone or face-to-face at Sue Lambert Trust

Rogers’ work showed that the client was empowered to do a great deal of self-healing when a person-centred approach was taken. He found that there was little need to DO anything, but just to BE.

He invented what he called the three Core Conditions which formed the basis of the therapeutic relationship with his clients:

- Empathy
- Congruence
- Unconditional Positive Regard

This approach has helped us enormously because, in reality, we cannot “fix” a client’s problems; we cannot know what is right for a client. Just as a client is empowered by a person centred approach, he is dis-empowered when we try to solve his problem.

This brings us to the first of Rogers’ core conditions:

**Congruence**

This refers our ability to be a real or genuine person with the client, a person who has no need to act as an expert, to feel superior or to pretend in any way. Because of this lack of pretence or superiority, we can encourage the client to seek the truth within himself and thus identify the core of his problem more effectively.

Rogers uses the word “transparent” to describe the truly congruent or genuine person, by which he meant that the person’s openness was so transparent that the client could see right through to the real person underneath.

Someone who is a real person will never attempt to deceive a client or pretend. For example, if a client behaves in a difficult or inconsistent fashion, the congruent person is not afraid to bring his perception of the situation to the client’s attention in a supportive way. By experiencing that it’s OK to be open, there is a greater chance that the client will be encouraged to be more open with himself. With this his openness, there often comes greater insight, self awareness, healing and progress.
Unconditional Positive Regard

This is the second of Carl Rogers core conditions and is about valuing and respecting the client without any condition attached. Unlike many situations in which value or respect is given conditionally, the relationship with a person-centred worker is completely different. It is quite possible that you are the only person in a client’s world who gives him unconditional respect and value.

At the core of this respect is a belief that the client, regardless of all his problems, feelings and behaviour, is a unique individual who has a right to be accepted for what he is. Rogers believed that this approach to his clients was essential if the client was to feel safe when speaking. Feeling safe means that the client knows he is not being judged by you, even though you may have a different value system to that of the client. The client needs to know that you appreciate him as a person regardless of his behaviour or the attitudes he might be expressing at the time. Combined, this approach enables the client to feel safe within himself; that it’s OK to be like this. In this context, the client is more willing to be open to exploring what he is experiencing, because we have not made any judgement of those things. It is our willingness to see beyond the client’s behaviour and to come closer to the real person that is essential if therapeutic movement is to take place.

Empathy

When we are empathic, we are capable of understanding the client and his world in as deep a way as we can. It’s like being in the client’s shoes and seeing his world as he sees it. This can be (and frequently is) completely different from our own perception of reality. In the work we do at Sue Lambert Trust, we meet clients who have experiences which are often “beyond our ken”. We talk about suspending disbelief, so as to give the client a completely different response to that he may have experienced from friends, family and even some professionals.

The empathic person will transmit this feeling of understanding back to the client who will be encouraged and supported by it.

Empathy is quite different from sympathy which is about feelings of pity, compassion or tenderness. Empathy requires enormous amounts of effort, concentration and discipline. An empathic worker will strive constantly for a clear awareness of the client’s feelings and then to experience the client’s world as if it were his own. This can be extremely difficult to accomplish as it involves intense active listening, not just to the words but to feelings expressed and conveyed non-verbally and sub-verbally.

An extract from “On Becoming a Person” by Carl Rogers

“The more that the client perceives the therapist as real or genuine, as empathic and having unconditional positive regard for him, the more the client will move away from a static, fixed, unfeeling, impersonal type of functioning, and the more he will move toward a way of functioning marked by a fluid, changing, acceptant experiencing of different personal feelings.

The consequence of this movement is an alteration in personality and behaviour in the direction of psychic health and maturity and more realistic relationships to self, others and the environment.”