“The Therapeutic Alliance”
Program Transcript

NARRATOR: The therapeutic alliance is at the core of successful counseling and psychotherapy. Doctor Linda Seligman discusses some misconceptions about the therapeutic alliance, and then goes on to point out characteristics of a strong therapeutic alliance.

LINDA SELIGMAN: As you learn about theories of counseling and psychotherapy, it's also very important for you to understand the overriding importance of the therapeutic alliance. It doesn't matter what your theoretical orientation is, whether it's psychodynamic, or cognitive behavioral, or something else, the state of the art today has demonstrated, that unless we have a strong therapeutic alliance with our client, therapy is not likely to be successful.

Let me talk about a couple of misconceptions about the therapeutic alliance, and then I'll talk about what the therapeutic alliance is, and some ways that you can develop a positive therapeutic alliance. Sometimes I've had students who think about developing a therapeutic alliance is something that you do in the first session or two, and then you stop worrying about it and you move into your real work with the client, it doesn't happen that way.

Developing a therapeutic alliance is something that begins the minute you start talking to a client on the telephone, when they call to make an appointment, and it permeates everything you do with that client. And you are constantly thinking about how you can join with that person, how you can be supportive, how you can be helpful, how you can promote the therapeutic alliance. So this underscores any treatment approach that you might be using.

I think another misconception that some people have is that if you think it's important to have a good therapeutic alliance, then you want to be a person centered therapist, and otherwise you can forget about it, and again that is a misconception. While person centered counseling does pay particular attention to the therapeutic alliance, nowadays all approaches to treatment, that are effective, advocate the importance of a strong therapeutic alliance. So, let's talk a little bit about what constitutes a strong therapeutic alliance.

One of my students suggested the acronym GET COP, and maybe this will help to remind you of some of the key elements. Let's start with the G in the acronym of GET COP. And the first concept that's important is Genuineness. And this means we need to be true to ourselves. We need to be honest with our clients, always of course with sensitivity, with caring, but we must present ourselves as a genuine human being in the work.

Second, is Empathy. The best definition I've heard for empathy, which you've probably heard, is we need to be able to walk in the other person's shoes, to
really put ourselves in their place, to feel their pain, to feel their joy, and to be able to put that into language that shows them that we really feel and understand what they're going through.

Third, T, is Trustworthiness. We need to be reliable and dependable. We need to respect professional boundaries. If we tell a client that we're going to call, or we're going to be available at a certain time, we need to follow through on that. So many of our clients have been damaged by unstable, unpredictable relationships. I think one of our important roles is giving them a different experience, a healing experience, and being someone they can really rely on to follow through.

Moving on to the C, for Congruence. This means we need to be consistent. We can't be saying, oh I really feel your pain, while we're thinking about the tuna fish sandwich we're going to eat for lunch. We need to be integrated and whole with our client, and fully present with that person.

The O stands for Optimism. And there's a lot of research showing that if we are optimistic, it inspires hope in our clients. And if they're hopeful that we can be helpful to them, they're going to work harder, they're going to make more positive changes, and this has a very positive impact on the treatment process.

The last letter in the acronym is P for Persuasiveness. By no means does this mean that we tell our clients what to do, or we try to direct them as we think they should behave, but rather, we give them a message that change is possible. And that they can join with us, they can work hard, they can effect positive change in their life, and as a team we can move forward and help them to reach their goals.

And, I think, if we can be mindful of these important elements in the therapeutic alliance, and nurture that therapeutic alliance in our work with our clients, regardless of our theoretical orientation, we're far more likely to be successful and helpful to our clients.

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