

## **Counseling Career Interview**

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Matt Molenaar (Licensed Clinical Social Worker) graduated from Illinois State University with a Masters in Sociology. After working two years in the mental health

field, he returned to school and earned his Masters in Clinical Social Work from the University of Illinois. The location of Matt's current private practice is about 12 miles south of the southern border of Chicago, in Lansing, Illinois. Housed in a renovated residential home, it sits on a main thoroughfare there in Lansing. At the same location, with separate entrances are his father's optical practice, and a lawyer's office. Though sparsely decorated the property is quite welcoming. Matt's office is in a downstairs, basement room. It is well lit and lightly colored. Matt's desk sits at one end of the room. In the other half of the room there are 3 chairs, two comfortable, padded guest chairs facing a third identical chair. There are lamps, a small clock, a box of tissues, and a potted plant on an end table nearer to the pair of chairs. Maybe because it is downstairs and in a basement, to me it felt safe.

Matt Molenaar, LCSW, grew up near the town where his practice is now. Going through school, he had many friends who opened up and shared their lives with him. I will share one funny story, he told me, that his friends said demonstrated his proclivity for counseling. Matt was on a date with a girl who had recently had a difficult break up with her boyfriend. The ex-boyfriend approached Matt and the girl. He acted threatening and was yelling at them both. Matt, calmly took him aside and asked him some questions to clarify what the boy was trying to accomplish. The boy's defenses dropped. He calmed down and at the end of their conversation offered, "Hey man, you should be a therapist or something." His interest in interpersonal communication and helping blossomed during his undergraduate studies and he chose to focus on Sociology. After graduating from Illinois State, in Normal, IL, he moved back north and into the city of Chicago. His choice to study sociology as an undergrad, led to a general

job search. A friend of his was working at Thresholds Mental Health Interventions of Chicago. Currently, with 75 program locations, it is a large organization that “provides services and resources for persons with serious mental illnesses and substance use disorders” (Thresholds, 2020, <https://www.thresholds.org/about/>). Matt was hired, though he had no prior mental health experience. He found a mentor there, in his supervisor, Mary Lang. Sometime later he asked Mary, why she had considered him without him having the amount of experience listed in the job description. She told him, she saw something in him and knew he was trainable, especially since he had already completed a Master’s degree. For two years he worked at Thresholds in mobile case support. He joked that the staff there cynically referred to this position as “Threshold taxi”. He drove clients to medication check appointments, to get groceries, and he did intensive outpatient training as well. This experience heightened his interest in social work and helping. He chose to begin graduate studies in clinical social work.

Matt received his clinical license in 2004, he has since gone on to train extensively in Emotionally Focused Therapy for couples and individuals. He is a CSAT (certified sexual addiction therapist), a credential earned through training with the International Institute of Trauma and Addiction Professionals (ITAAP). ITAAP, keeps current listings of all CSATs and they can be searched according to locations and specialties.

The Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is the main approach that Matt uses. It has come out of various theories. Namely, Attachment research, by James Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. In EFT, the counselor’s role shares the perspective of Carl Rogers’ Humanistic. As Erford describes in *Orientation to Counseling*, three essential attributes

of a counselor are to be genuine, offer the client unconditional positive regard, and show empathy (2015, Erford). John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's well-known studies clearly demonstrated early infant-mother bonding and its impact throughout a person's life by way of attachment styles. Many have built on this foundation of research and application of Attachment Styles developed by Mary Ainsworth. Some prominent Christian therapists have worked with this theory, Dr. Henry Cloud draws from attachment studies and styles in his book *Boundaries* (2004,2017) and *Changes that Heal* (2018). More recently, Curt Thompson M.D. has adapted attachment theory in our relationship to God with his book *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe about Ourselves* (2015).

Matt shared clients change most when she or he feels understood. When they are understood, they feel safe, this safety makes room for change. If someone is feeling misunderstood, on the other hand, they will cling to their defenses. As a therapist, he told me his job is not to convince someone to let go of their defenses. But to acknowledge them and realize they are there. This can be the beginning of change.

One technique Matt utilizes in his office with many clients is, what he called, "present processing". In this technique, Matt will simply ask a client, "What is going on in your body right now?" He will "attune" to a client by carefully observing facial features, body language, and tone. If a client is particularly guarded, he may ask them to close their eyes, to breath and be aware of any sensations in their body. Do they feel tense? Where is that tension located? Does it have a shape? Is there a texture to it? All these descriptive questions are for the purposes of acknowledging and expressing feelings that a client may be used to ignoring.

Matt's experience of multicultural, sexual, and gender issues in his practice is different from his experience at Thresholds. He found that socio-economic status is one of the biggest factors in many difficulties that his clients faced. Matt shared that he works with both sexes, a variety of genders, and a variety of ethnic backgrounds and that his desire is to learn from clients about their background so he can know them more fully. He maintained that the most important posture a therapist can take is to be open for learning from and receiving feedback from clients. Whether it means learning about a client's culture or helping them be honest about what he as a counselor may be doing that offends.

As I spent time talking with Matt, I was reminded how much I enjoyed talking with him. He and I had only 7 or 8 sessions together, but it was at a critical period for me, transitioning back to stateside ministry after serving in Indonesia for 3 1/2 years. His calm approach and measured demeanor helped me greatly in beginning to identify the roots of my addictive behaviors. The International Trauma and Addiction Professionals (ITAAP) website was helpful in locating him. During the interview, he was very open to answer any question I had. He continues to use and promote Emotionally Focused Therapy is an essential part of the process he takes clients through.

#### References

Cloud, H. and Townsend, J. (2004, 2017) Boundaries, Zondervan Publishers.

Erford, B. (2017,2018) Orientation to the Counseling Profession, 3rd edition, Pearson.

Thompson, C. (2015) The Soul of Shame, Intervarsity Press.