

Counselor Identity Paper

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GCN 522: Foundations of Mental Health Counseling

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October 17, 2022

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The role of a professional helper is a unique calling. It is both a humbling privilege and a solemn burden to walk alongside people in their darkest times and to sit next to them in their darkest corners. Helpers are called to hold space for others, to lift them up, and to encourage them toward progress. Yet, there is also a delicate balance for helpers to not mistake themselves as saviors. The goal of the professional helper should be to enable others to achieve sustainable independence.

Since I was a child, I have always wanted to spend my time helping others. However, early in my career, I was drawn in by selfish ambition and financial security and chose to pursue a career in Strategy Consulting which was all about helping corporate profitability rather than human flourishing. After 12 years of eliminating nearly 3,000 jobs, I left Strategy Consulting and shifted into a career in Learning & Development and Coaching. My current job is focused on helping others develop competency so that they might flourish in their careers. However, in my work in the corporate world and in coaching, I often see people who might seem fine on the surface, but are being held back by something that is standing in the way of their ability to reach their full potential. What stands in their way is usually some trauma or wounding in their past that is holding them hostage and I knew I was not equipped nor could I ethically help my clients explore their traumas and heal. I now want to expand into helping others heal more deeply so that they might thrive and flourish in their lives and for generations.

I believe I have three personality characteristics that may serve as personal strengths in my role as a helping professional. First, I tend to see the good in people and their potential to be great. This comes through in how I lead organizations with an inherited workforce. Many leaders who inherit an organization would seek first to get rid of people who they feel aren't star

performers and then bring in their own people into the organization. I tend to believe that people who I inherit are entrusted in my care and therefore I take care to get to know them, see their potential, and find opportunities to help them lean into their strengths and do their best work. I recently started a new job as the Chief Learning Officer for Mastercard and am taking the time to know each person in my organization individually, understand their strengths and passions, and seek to connect their strengths and passions with the needs of our organization.

Second, I have a skill for encouraging others balanced with the discernment of not enabling them. Growing up, I saw my parents enabling my younger brother by doing everything for him, rather than letting him learn and fail on his own while providing encouragement and support. My brother is now 33 years old and still has trouble taking care of himself and his wife and depends on my parents for financial support and everyday responsibilities. Witnessing this has driven me to focus strongly on encouraging and equipping, rather than enabling. This comes through in how I work with my coaching clients. When I work with my clients, we spend time exploring the issues they are facing and talking through what they have tried in the past, what worked well and what didn't, and what might they try next. I then get them to commit to a next course of action, including how they are going to do it, by when, what derailers they might encounter, and what support they might need. I then subsequently hold them accountable to this commitment in our follow-up conversations. Sometimes my clients will want me to just tell them what to do. However, because my focus is on helping them toward sustainable transformation and progress, it is important for me to not become a crutch for them. When this happens, I might offer them some suggested options of what they could do. This way, I am providing some guidance but still making sure they are empowered with decision making and ownership.

Third, I have built up the capacity to be a safe and spacious place for people. In this space, I try to ensure my clients and employees feel safe to explore, discover, try, and fail. What this requires of me is to stay grounded and attuned to my own emotions and reactions. To maintain the space, I make sure that I am not expressing judgment or making others feel ashamed. For example, in my work as a deaconess, I am often working with people who are in their greatest time of need. Our diaconate clients are typically coming to us as a last resort and feel immense shame. Because people are often coming to us asking for temporary financial support, we need their vulnerability to allow us to understand their financial situation, including the amount of money they have in their bank accounts, their credit card balances, and the details of their weekly budget. This is very uncomfortable for our clients but it is important for them and us to understand the realities of the situation so that we are able to start making progress toward sustainable stability. Throughout my years of serving as a deaconess, I have been able to build up the muscle of being non-judgmental, objective, and empathetic. I am also careful in what I say and how I say it so that my diaconate clients don't feel shame and embarrassment when they are feeling so exposed and vulnerable.

These strengths will help me in the space of person-centered counseling. I believe that the three core conditions of person-centered counseling – genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and empathy – are also three of the most important things a counselor can do or embody during a counseling session. Carl Rogers believed that the three core conditions are the key to unlocking people's ability to “get in touch with their true selves...to facilitate change” (Neukrug, 2022). The idea is that people have an “actualizing tendency,” meaning that their innate inclination is to return to their true selves to achieve their ideal selves. This actualizing tendency is nurtured and fostered when people feel safe, validated, and valued. This has

certainly been true in my own personal experiences in therapy. When I first started therapy in 2016, I was skeptical on how effectively I could actually heal just from talking about my problems. However, in my first session with my first counselor, I shared with her the wounding I experienced in my childhood and her response of empathy and validation surprised me. She simply said “Emily, that must have been so hurtful. I’m sorry.” Those words were like a healing balm to my soul. That moment became a pivotal turning point in my healing journey and those words opened the door for me to accept someone’s empathy, care, and attention. Because both of the counselors I have had were genuine, empathetic, and displayed unconditional positive regard no matter what I shared with them, it helped me to be honest about my past and present shames, peel back the masks I have worn for so long, and come to love myself for how God has created me.

While I acknowledge and appreciate my strengths, I also recognize three of my personality characteristics that may serve as personal barriers in my role as a helping professional. First, while I tend to see the good in people and am able to encourage and motivate them toward reaching their full potential, I can get discouraged when they are not making progress. At times, this discouragement can show up as frustration and impatience. I often seek prayer to prevent my frustration and impatience from festering and hurting others. I pray for God to give me awareness for when I am starting to be frustrated and impatient. He allows me to feel it in my body when someone is triggering me. My breath becomes quick and shallow, my ability to listen erodes, my shoulders perk up while my jaw clenches, and I feel this energy trapped in my throat that is almost like an avalanche of words waiting to get out. When that happens, I tell myself “you are being triggered right now” and pray in the moment. I don’t

always catch it, but it has improved. I also notice that the more I catch it, pray, and sit with the discomfort, the more capacity I am building to remain patient and open in these instances.

Second, people sometimes perceive me as intimidating, stoic, and “having it all together” which might hinder their willingness to be in a space of vulnerability with me. I was abused, assaulted, and bullied by several different people when I was growing up. As a result, I had built up an armor of toughness in order to protect myself. With this armor, it has been my instinct to not smile very much, to be aloof, and to make others feel small with my glare. Being well-coiffed, well-dressed, and well-spoken is also part of this armor. It was only in the last two years that I have been intentional in taking off that armor and allowing others to see the real me. More importantly, allowing others to connect with the real me. It is still hard as I fight the urges to hide back in my armor. However, I am encouraged to press on as I experience the pleasure of closer and deeper relationships with people.

Third, while I have improved, I still struggle with humbly accepting the limits of my capacity. I am naturally a high energy and ambitious person who wants to do it all. I have a distorted pride that leads me to believe that I have the capacity to do more than normal people. This came crashing down on me last year when I suffered a mini-stroke that disabled me for three months. That experience was the wake-up call I needed to accept my humanity and prioritize self-care. I have learned to be more realistic about my capacity and more intentional about enforcing my boundaries. In order to balance work, graduate school, church leadership, and dog mom duties, I know I need to be strict about only working 40 hours a week, being okay with not getting 100% on every school assignment, asking for help, and being honest with myself and others when I am feeling overwhelmed.

I am grateful for the opportunity to build the muscle of self-care before I become a Counselor. I know I need to be physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually healthy in order to be there for my clients. Self-care used to seem like an abstract concept to me and I used to think it was only about meditating everyday. However, it has been helpful for me to understand self-care in concrete ways. For example, to maintain my physical self-care, I track to make sure I am sleeping at least seven hours a night and that I am working out at least three times a week. Recently, I have also been trying to adopt a more balanced and nutritious diet. To maintain social self-care, I prioritize talking on the phone with my mom everyday, even if it is only for a few minutes. I also prioritize spending quality time with my friends every week. To maintain emotional self-care, I meet with my Counselor once a week to identify, discuss, and process long-standing issues, like fear of intimacy, and current issues, like the stress and frustration of buying real estate in New York. I also receive emotional support from my dog by simply delighting in him. Finally, to maintain spiritual self-care, I pray to God throughout the day, pray with and receive prayer from my community, and worship.

Counseling is a unique calling and it should be considered a privilege and honor to walk with fellow human beings in the depths of their sorrows, fears, and shame. As I consider the call to become a Counselor, I recognize the importance of not glamorizing the profession. I know there will be clients who confirm my calling and clients who make me question my calling. The client population I think I would have the most success counseling are those who are committed to change. I enjoy encouraging others and seeing them thrive as a result. Therefore, it would be validating to me when a client is enthusiastically engaged in our counseling sessions and motivated to transform and heal. I can see myself being energized by working with clients like this and looking forward to the sessions. However, I recognize how self-serving this is because

it is more about how I feel and how I am validated, rather than having a more client-centric perspective and priority. An important reminder for me will be what Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. (New International Version Bible, 2011, 1 Cor. 3:6-9)

As it is in ministry and any other job, we are co-workers in God's service. While we are expected to work diligently according to the gifts God has given us, it is ultimately He who achieves the results.

On the flip side, I am often triggered by people who approach life with a lens of learned helplessness. This is the population that I would probably have the most difficult time counseling. I think my avoidant attachment style might play a role in why this population is particularly triggering for me. I have always been independent and self-sufficient with the drive to figure out a way to solve any problem that comes before me. Deep down, I always desired receiving help and not feeling the pressure to do everything on my own. Thus, when I see people who can't seem to help themselves and are dependent on others, it strikes a deep nerve for me. Sometimes it almost feels like an attack on my survival instinct. Similar to above, this is also a very self-serving perspective and is more about my own glory and success, rather than the client's healing and transformation. Again, Scripture will be an important teacher and guide for me. For these clients, I consider Jesus' teaching as follows:

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come. (New International Version Bible, 2011, Mark 4:26-29)

To work with this population, I need to remember that God is the one with the true power of transformation and healing. He calls us to “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (New International Version Bible, 2022, Matt. 11:28). As a Counselor, I would not have so much power that the client can only heal if I do or say certain things. As Paul says in his letter to the Thessalonians: “The one who calls you is faithful, and He will do it” (New International Version Bible, 2011, 1 Thess. 5:24).

As I continue to pursue the calling of Counseling, I pray that I will remain faithful, humble, gentle, patient, and kind. The purpose we work toward in Counseling is to bring hope, healing, and joy to this side of heaven. We need to remember what a privilege it is to play a role in showing the world a foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth where all of God’s creation is restored and healed.

References

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