

## **Counselor Identity Paper**

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“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (The Holy Bible, NIV, 1973/2011, Isaiah 43:19). This verse was a significant verse for me about 15 years ago when I was working as the children’s director at my local church. We had intercessors pray for our ministry and our community. This verse along with a vision of dandelions springing up from cracks in hard places was the picture that the intercessors saw for our ministry as they prayed for us. At the time, I was juggling work while raising four very young children. Although life was extremely busy during those years, I enjoyed it. Fifteen years later, I zoomed into my first Foundations of Mental Health Counseling with Dr. Hernandez and this same verse appeared on the screen. It hit me deeply because here I was beginning another season in my life. This time however, my kids are now grown and I am experiencing some significant life changes. Although this transitional stage in my life is still unfolding, I believe the Lord is directing me to begin a new season in my life that involves mental health counseling. My past experiences, first as a public school teacher, then a mom of four and working in ministry, have led me to wanting to be a professional counselor. My past role and jobs in these areas have provided me with a lot of unofficial mentoring and counseling experiences. As I begin my journey as a student in mental health, I am faced with some very big transitions in my life and I am experiencing first hand the benefits of professional counselors. As such, I am learning what it is like to be both a counselor and a client.

As I go through counseling myself, I recognize first hand the effects from childhood trauma. These unresolved issues have affected my own marriage. Neukrug lists fourteen shared theoretical assumptions held by couples and family therapists regarding human nature. As I read through the list, two points really stood out and described my life currently. “All couples and

families will face unexpected stressors in life, and couples and family counselors should have the tools to help them deal with such stressors. And , In some manner, the past influences personality development and how individuals relate to one another in the present.” (Neukrug, 2022, p. 187).

My husband and I both come from dysfunctional families and although we tried to raise a family together, our own childhood issues have affected us as a family. I believe it is important to address past childhood trauma as well as address how to move forward in light of these issues. My husband suffered childhood trauma that not only affected his personality, it has affected how he relates as a husband and father. With the help of a marriage and family therapist, we are able to see and address the deficits. My husband and I grew up in Chinese communities and culturally within the Asian community, mental health was not embraced or prioritized. Perhaps if there were more priority given to mental health within our Chinese communities, we would be in a better place. We are currently in the midst of major life changes and there are significant events that are changing the course of my life. As I learn to process these major shifts in my life, I am extremely grateful I have a licensed counselor to help me navigate not only the practical details required to move forward in this season, but to help me understand and process my emotions and general state of being. This is also important preparation for me to be a counselor.

As a counselor, it is crucial to be mindful of personal issues and recognize the need to address these issues before meeting with a client. The Youtube video : *Drowning in Empathy: The Cost of Vicarious Trauma* by Amy Cunningham really struck a chord in me. She talks about compassion fatigue and selfcare. Both issues are issues of which I need to be mindful.

“Compassion fatigue is the post traumatic stress disorder related symptoms that you receive vicariously as a secondary target to trauma.” (Cunningham, 2016, 1:12) Cunningham warns that people who are empathetic by nature in a helping profession are more prone to compassion

fatigue. She also advises to prioritize selfcare. From my past experiences, I have learned that I need to be mindful of these two areas if I am to become an effective counselor. By nature, I am an empathetic person and I like to understand people. Also by nature, I am a perfectionist and I have a tendency to want to solve problems. Although empathy is a strength in counseling, it is important to set boundaries and limits with clients. There was a season in my life where I was raising four young children in an environment that encouraged over scheduled activities while working on staff at my local church. I focused on everyone else's needs around me and neglected my own. I eventually faced burn out. I have learned from that season the importance of setting boundaries and practicing self care.

Brown (2021) talks about the importance of recognizing and understanding emotions for our healing, growth and well being.

Language is our portal to meaning-making, connection, healing, learning, and self-awareness. Having access to the right words can open up entire universes. . . . Without accurate language, we struggle to get the help we need, we don't always regulate or manage our emotions and experiences in a way that allows us to move through them productively, and our self-awareness is diminished. Language shows us that naming an experience doesn't give the experience more power, it gives us the power of understanding and meaning. (p. xxi)

Brown's connection between language and emotions is an important aspect of counseling. She explains insightfully the myriad of emotions and how they connect to behaviors and well-being. I am learning to more accurately identify my own emotions for my own growth and healing. This will in turn give me the tools to assist others in counseling.

All my life circumstances have led me to the field of counseling. My personal experiences, both the successes and failures have enabled me to understand and appreciate deeply what is involved in counseling. I am developing a better understanding of what is involved in the professional help professions and how mental health counselors help people in regards to their mental health and general well being. The timing for me to enter this profession is now and I believe I am learning the necessary tools to become an effective counselor. The life stressors that I am currently facing are forcing me to look deeply within to address my own personal well being, both my past emotional state and my current mental well being. I recognize how important it is to stay mentally healthy for the people around me and in order to be an effective counselor. “Counselors who avoid working on their own struggles while continuing to counsel clients are more at risk of practicing incompetently. All counselors have a responsibility, and an urgency, to be aware of the pressures and stresses that impinge on their lives and how these might affect their relationships with clients. “ (Neukrug, 2022, p. 26). Counselors need to be self aware of areas in their life that can hinder their ability to be an effective counselor. Self reflection should be an ongoing practice to regulate ourselves as counselors. Two other areas in my life that I need to be mindful of as I become a counselor is my perfectionistic tendencies and my need to please others. There was a time in my life where these two characteristics, as unhealthy as it may have been, helped accomplish many things in my life. As mentioned earlier, it led to burnout. These two tendencies can be particularly detrimental and unproductive in the helping profession. Oftentimes clients have issues in their lives that are complicated and difficult to resolve. As a counselor, I need to be mindful of what I can and cannot do to help my client. A perfectionist can easily become all consumed in wanting to solve their client’s problems. And a

people pleaser would seek recognition for progress in sessions. Both of these characteristics are unhealthy and can be harmful in a counseling relationship.

Aside from self reflection and being mindful of areas of hindrances as a counselor, one of the most important components of being an effective counselor is empathy. This characteristic resonates with me as I am empathetic by nature and am naturally drawn to helping people.

Neukrug (2022) quotes Rogers:

*Understanding our clients, or being empathetic means that the therapist senses accurately the feelings and personal meanings that the client is experiencing . . . the therapist is so much inside the private world of the other that he or she can clarify not only the meanings of which the client is aware but even those just below the level of awareness. Listening, of this very special, active kind, is one of the most potent forces of change that I know.” (Rogers, 1989, p.136) (p.18).*

I also believe listening well is part of empathy. Not only are you trying to listen to what the client is saying, you are listening to what is beneath the words and trying to empathize with the client. I like to listen for what is said and what is beyond the words spoken. Sometimes it is in the tone or facial expressions and body language that tell you more. Sometimes it is an intuitive sense of more beyond the words. My counselor has helped bring deeper awareness and insight into my own situation. She has also helped me process my emotions. Between my past experiences helping and mentoring others as well as having a counselor help me in my difficult season, I am learning to strengthen my empathic and listening skills. I recognize these to be important tools for me one day as a counselor.

Acceptance is another trait that is crucial in the helping profession. “Acceptance is an attitude that suggests that regardless of what the client says, they will feel accepted” (Neukrug,

2022, p. 18). Over the years I have learned that people all have issues one way or another, whether they verbalize it or not. And having lived and worked in diverse communities, I recognize the need for understanding people coming from different backgrounds and perspectives. Respecting these differences is respecting the community. As a counselor, I need to be mindful of these differences as I work with clients.

Multicultural counseling is an area that I am very interested in, especially as an Asian American female having grown up in both Asian communities as well as worked in diverse communities. Neukrug recognizes that multicultural and social justice are two areas that are related when talking about multicultural counseling. “Today, the competencies reflect the minimum standards needed by all counselors if they are to work effectively with diverse clients.” (Bray, 2019; Counselors for Social Justice, 2021) The competencies cover four domains: (a) counselor self awareness, (b) client worldview, (c) counseling relationship and (d) counseling and advocacy interventions.” (Neukrug, 2022, p. 90). I believe that given my background and experiences as an Asian American woman with four kids, a good possible starting point for potential clients may be with a similar population. Growing up a part of an Asian community, mental health was rarely discussed and counseling was not readily embraced. Not only have I experienced first hand the dysfunctions in my own family growing up and its effects as an adult, my husband’s family did not address their family trauma either. Culturally, there was little to no support for emotional well being and the idea of taking care of mental health. Values were placed more on accomplishments instead of emotional well being. There may be stigma that linger regarding mental health in this population, but I hope to help normalize the benefits of counseling.

I believe a counselor needs to first build a good rapport and relationship with the client. In the initial session, the counselor and client are able to feel out the dynamics of their relationship. It is important that the counselor and client have a rapport that enables the client to feel comfortable opening up and sharing difficult and vulnerable aspects of their life. There was a period in my daughter's life during the Covid Pandemic that she needed a counselor. She expressed her need for someone that she felt could relate to her. From her perspective, she felt a younger female counselor closer to her age and generation was a better fit than an older person. A positive relationship between counselor and client is crucial in helping the client make progress.

It is also important that the counselor creates a safe environment for the client to comfortably share. In my own counseling sessions, I am free to share with my counselor vulnerable aspects of my situation and she is able to help me navigate all the changes that are in my life. She is also helping me gain a healthy perspective of my situation.

In addition to creating a safe space, counselors need to be mindful of being objective and avoid imposing their own values or beliefs. Neukrug highlights the importance of "Avoiding harm and not imposing one's own values" (Neukrug p69) It is important that the counselor listens and advocates for the client regardless of the counselor's own values and beliefs. I remember talking to my sister in law who is a licensed counselor. She had a client that had very different life values and a lot of her client's life choices and consequences are the results of this client's extreme belief systems. My sister in law had to counsel this client within this client's rather extreme worldview. Everyone has a worldview and perspective in life and a counselor needs to be mindful of their own perspectives as well as those of their client.

Another aspect of being a good counselor is “maintaining appropriate boundaries and professional relationships with clients and documenting boundary extensions” Neukrug p.69) The counselor is to maintain their professional rapport with the client and keep confidentiality of the counselor and client relationship. This has been key in my own experience meeting with my counselor. I was recommended to my counselor by a circle of people that know my husband and the circumstances for which I need counseling. Even though my counselor knows these people well, she has maintained complete privacy in our counseling relationship.

Aside from maintaining appropriate boundaries, Neukrug raises the issue of “knowing when to keep and break confidentiality (e.g., when there is foreseeable harm, during end-of-life decision making, when a client has a contagious, life threatening disease, or court-ordered clients)” (Neukrug p.69) As a counselor, it is important to make informed professional decisions that protect the client and the community. It is important to recognize when your client needs help beyond the counselor’s ability to do so. Understanding one's limitations and knowing how to direct the client to further help is very important. Professional counselors follow ethical codes and “practice within one’s professional competence and know what to do when one is professionally or psychologically impaired or incapacitated.” (Neukrug, p70) I have learned a great deal about understanding my own limits and boundaries from my own past failures and successes. This will help me as a counselor to know when I need to refer a client to outside resources for further help.

As I mature in my self awareness and make selfcare a priority, I believe I am developing the characteristics necessary to be a professional counselor. There is still a lot more growth within myself to become a counselor and this growth will probably be on going for the rest of my life. This journey has not been without challenges and pain, however, I believe that it is within

these difficult circumstances that I am becoming more whole as a person and better equipped to enter the counseling profession to help others.

## References

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