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Metaphor: A Counselor's Tool for Change

By Kenyada Owens

Counseling and metaphors encompass the process of change and action through language and dialogue. According to Gareth Morgan (2002), "Images and metaphors are not only interpretive constructs or ways of seeing, they also provide frameworks for action. Their use creates insights that often allow us to act in ways that we may not have thought possible before" (p. 1). Metaphors, from the counseling perspective, can serve as a vehicle for implementing change.

Whether directly or indirectly, clients seek the help of therapeutic professionals with the intent of initiating some form of growth or change. Although the process of transformation is easy to acknowledge and identify, it often times is difficult for one to accept, initiate, or implement. It is imperative for therapeutic professionals to bridge the gap between the actual individual and the internalized self that lies dormant. Barker (1985) notes the following:

> Metaphors can assist both in motivating clients to become actively involved in defining the desired outcomes—for example, through telling stories about endeavors that failed because they were embarked upon without properly defined objectives—and in the actual process of developing the objectives. They can also inspire people who feel their situation is hopeless, or almost so, to believe that change for the better is possible (p. 73).

The implementation of a tool, such as metaphor, is able to provide various avenues for self-growth, as well as enhancing the communication between the client and the therapist while offering support and encouragement (Bayne & Thomason, 2000).

Although widely used within the area of counseling, metaphors possess the potential to be somewhat paradoxical. The role that is to be assumed by the metaphor is highly dependent upon the actions and ability of the therapist, thus strongly emphasizing the necessity of therapists to proceed carefully. The most significant precautionary measure to take when using metaphors in therapy stresses the importance of the therapist being trained and knowledgeable in the use of metaphors in therapy. Barker (1985) offers additional guidelines deemed necessary in order to maximize the use of metaphors in therapy which include the following:

1. Establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect with the client(s).
2. Clearly define the problem.
3. Set specific goals.
4. Work in conjunction with the client to establish a concrete plan to achieve set goals.

5. Allow the client(s) to assume an active role in the metaphors that are to be used.
6. Ensure that the metaphors used are appropriate for the given problem and client.
7. Remain consistent in their use and thematic meaning.

Metaphors are considered to be an effective approach to communication. When used properly, the effect can yield vast results in terms of client success (Haley, 1996). Lyddon, Clay and Sparks (2001) suggest that metaphors are "central to five developmental change processes in counseling: (a) relationship building, (b) accessing and symbolizing emotions, (c) uncovering and challenging clients' tacit assumptions, (d) working with client resistance, and (e) introducing new frames of reference" (p. 270). The continued use of metaphors throughout the therapeutic process is highly recommended as a way of assisting clients through their metamorphosis. However, adhering to the aforementioned guidelines is highly stressed.

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