

## My Experience of What Works As a Caring Professional

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This article is about my experience as a clinical psychologist working with a variety of patients/clients over a period of more than 30 years in different settings. The purpose of this article is to provide information regarding what I found works in a therapeutic situation when working with clients as a caring professional.

**Keywords:** Psychologist, Patients, Clients

### Main Focus Areas Spanning More Than Thirty Years

My work over the last more than 30 years was in a variety of settings such as psychologist in correctional facilities, mental health facilities, private practice, forensic evaluations and consultant in different working environments.

My main focus areas and clients served in all these settings were the following:

- Males, Females and Adolescents
- Persons from different cultures
- Dealing with anxiety, depression, bereavement and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Assisting with Stress Management (Personal and in the Workplace)
- Maintaining close working relationships with a team of specialists (e.g. medical practitioners, psychiatrists, neurologists, dieticians & occupational therapists)
- Conducting Forensic Assessments as an Expert Witness for both State and Defence Counsel.

### Reflections of My Own Experiences of What Works in a Therapeutic Process and Environment

My following works best for me in any therapeutic process:

- Establishing rapport with the client. The first few seconds are extremely important. Especially how you greet the client, establish eye contact, give a handshake, smile and observe the responses of the client.
- Developing trust as many clients have trust issues due to bad/traumatic experiences encountered in the past either with family members or their significant others. Once rapport has been established the client will feel comfortable and feel safe in an environment where they are able to completely trust you with their darkest secrets, their deep emotional wounds and pain, their anger and rage, feeling accepted and not rejected in a non-judgemental environment – If you do this, I find that more than 50% of the work has already been done.
- To really listen attentively to the client and try to understand

where they are coming from. This is really a special and important skill as clients will immediately know if the therapist is paying attention and listening, or not. I fondly remember my grandmother who always quoted the following rhyme, one that I have always remembered and links directly to the work we as therapists do:

“A wise old owl sat in an oak.  
The more he heard, the less he spoke;  
The less he spoke, the more he heard;  
Why aren't we all like that wise old bird?”  
(Charles M Schulz)

- Provide basic empathy in a non-judgemental manner. It really does not matter what you hear from your client, even if it shocks you to your core. The most important thing to remember is to remain non-judgemental.
- Reflection is as important as listening; as it shows the client you understand and comprehend where they are coming from. I have found that even if the reflection is sometimes inaccurate, the client will correct it immediately. It is not necessarily a problem if the therapist acknowledges that he/she made a mistake and corrects or reinterprets it.
- Listen intently during every consultation. This allows the client to describe his/her problem without interruptions. Additional information can be obtained later. To probe is equally important specially to determine contradictions, to obtain the truth, to clarify information and to gain a better understanding.
- I find it necessary to sometimes confront a client if I notice discrepancies. I also follow a very direct approach and inform client's right from the start that I am direct, open and clear. Most of my clients prefer this approach as they need to know, or, want to know what to do sooner rather than later and do not have time or money for lengthy psychotherapeutic sessions/treatments due to the high cost of psychological treatment.
- I often use metaphors that relates to a client's own life or experience. For instance, if they participate in a sport (e.g. golf, tennis or rugby) the particular strengths of the sport will be accentuated to illustrate possible outcomes. I also use the importance of balancing the wheels of a vehicle to illustrate where problem areas are that need to be addressed/fine-tuned – everyone knows that if the wheels of a vehicle are not balanced properly it could lead to an accident.
- Therapy can sometimes be very stressful for both client and therapist. I have found that in some instances the use of humour

or to find something to laugh about in a consultation can be beneficial and important. The same applies for compassion when a client is dealing with death and bereavement; I then provide them sufficient silence to recover from crying or to remember a particular moment.

- I utilise and teach many clients relaxation and breathing exercises –this is a skill they can utilise whenever they need to, it does not necessitate medication and it helps them to stay in control.
- It is imperative to enable clients to view and explore different life choices. These choices are then all explored in the therapeutic process and both the positives and negatives of the choices are then considered. The final choice and responsibility lies with the client as that provide them autonomy and personal power as well as the feeling of being in control of their own decisions and choices made.
- Time management skills are more important today than ever. I have found that many of my clients work twelve (12) or more hours every day in order to adhere to work commitments/expectations. Most clients mention they do not have time for their families or themselves, suffer from sleep disorders, are tired most of the time and are unhappy / unsatisfied in their current work environments. When we work through their “normal” twenty-four (24) hour day and what they do with their time, it often provides clarity and knowledge as to where they can and need to take back control of their life. I also make use of a few old African proverbs about work and career that bring wisdom to life, such as:

“You cannot work for food when there is no food for work.”

“Work is good, as long as you don’t forget to live.”

“The mouth does not eat if the feet do not walk and the hands work”.

- Another important aspect for clients is to set new goals for themselves, and for them to understand that there are short, medium and long-term goals to work towards.
- I have found that important steps on the way to healing can occur when clients start to utilise or tap into their own creativity. Some clients have discovered an ability to paint or create beautiful mosaics. Others rediscovered an interest in gardening or another activity that they previously practiced but never gave enough attention to, or they discover something brand new they previously did not even remotely consider would interest them as a hobby.
- I use positive reinforcement and teach them how to write affirmations. This is often a very empowering feeling for my clients as many of them have experienced none or very few positive reinforcements from either their parents or other authority figures in the past or present. It also helps them move forward to achieve their goals.
- I am very clear with clients that they need to take responsibility for their own life, the choices they make and for their own future happiness. When therapy sessions come to an end, I leave it open for them to decide if they want to return to therapy for any future issues or problems they would like to discuss.
- The acceptance of gratitude from clients is an aspect that I feel is important and needs to be addressed and acknowledged. This also forms part of dealing with transference and counter-transference in the therapeutic process. I have never received expensive gifts which I could or would not accept. What I do accept are gifts from clients who write a note or make a thank

you card, birthday or Christmas card, bring flowers from their own gardens for my office, or on very rare occasions ask to give me a hug, more common with children and female clients.

### Awareness of how helping others can affect you

Like so many other practitioners in the helping/caring professions, we need to recognize the warning signs of compassion fatigue. It is often very stressful and emotionally draining to listen to the trauma and distress of patients/clients for 8-10 hours per day without thinking about the impact it has on your life.

From my experience the following symptoms should not be ignored:

- Emotional Exhaustion / Burnout
- Difficulty showing empathy to clients
- Depression
- Disengagement from work and social interpersonal interaction
- Withdrawing from all types of activities previously enjoyed

My own self-care strategies to mitigate the stressors of compassion fatigue in order to prevent burn-out are the same as those that I discuss with my clients in the therapeutic process but are often ignored by the helping professional themselves.

- To consciously create a healthy work-personal life balance
- Make time for yourself by creating “me-time”(take time off and read a book, go for a massage, have lunch with friends, have your nails done, go away for a weekend or take a longer holiday, take your dog for a walk after work, etc.)
- Attend conferences (national and international) and invest in continuous training in order to develop new skills and expertise
- Develop and maintain supportive relationships with family, friends and colleagues
- Utilise supervision or debriefing sessions with another trusted professional

In conclusion, I have had many valuable learning opportunities over the past thirty plus (30+) years. I have developed and evolved and have emerged as a person who plays a vital role in the promotion of healthy human behaviour by helping to not only improve the quality of life of my patients/clients, but also be a mentor for other psychologists or those in other caring professions due to my experience, knowledge and skills. I hope to encourage and inspire others to follow their own path to not only become the best that they can be, but also in the interest of those who are in our care and in need of our assistance and emotional support.

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