



# Importance of Theory in Counselling

Counselling theory forms a large part of counselling training courses, but why is it so important? Particularly when you are new to a specific modality, it may feel very hard work to understand the relevant theory, but it really is worth getting to grips with.

## **Definition of Theory**

Feltham and Dryden (1993, p. 192) define 'theory' as 'conceptualisation of and explanation for the ways in which people function and malfunction, and in which counselling helps or cannot help'.

## **Core Purpose of Theory**

Thus, the primary reason for needing to understand and be familiar with the theory of your chosen modality is so that you have a framework through which you can view the issues that the client brings to counselling. Without this, you would risk the counselling work being inefficient – or even seeking to tackle an issue that is not amenable to your therapeutic approach. For example, understanding the theory might enable:

- a person-centred counsellor to realise and explain the need to refer a phobic client to a CBT therapist
- a CBT therapist to realise and explain the need to refer a client struggling with the emotions of bereavement to a person-centred counsellor.

In other words, understanding theory – and, importantly, being able to apply it to practice – helps therapists to take on – and work efficiently and effectively with – clients whom they have a good chance of being able to help, and to refer those who could benefit more from a different modality.

Theory therefore enables you to work in the best service of the client. Thus, theory links with ethics, since we have an ethical obligation to ‘put clients first by ... making clients our primary concern while we are working with them [and] ... providing an appropriate standard of service to our clients’ (BACP, 2018, p. 6).

### **Detailed Functions of Theory**

Boy and Pine (1983, p. 251) suggest that the purpose of counselling theory can be broken down into the following six functions:

- 1. It helps counsellors find unity and relatedness within the diversity of existence.*
- 2. It compels counsellors to examine relationships they would otherwise overlook.*
- 3. It gives counsellors operational guidelines by which to work and help them evaluate their development as professionals.*
- 4. It helps counsellors focus on relevant information and tell them what to look for.*
- 5. It helps counsellors assist clients in the effective modification of their behavior, cognitions, emotional functioning and interpersonal relationships.*
- 6. It helps counsellors evaluate both old and new approaches to the process of counselling.*

### **How You Can Facilitate Theory-Learning**

- Select theory resources that fit with your own learning style (i.e. auditory, kinaesthetic or visual).
- Investigate and access the huge range of resources available these days via technology.

- Connect with peers who are students of the same modality, discussing any points of theory that you are not sure about.
- Don't be afraid to ask your tutor to re-explain theoretical concepts.
- Once you are client-facing (in placement as a student), make sure that you choose a clinical supervisor whose practice is in the same modality as you.
- In the counselling room, try to focus on listening and understanding their client. (It can be very distracting to keep going 'into your head' to think theoretically during client sessions. This will come naturally in the end, but offering the client the core conditions is the priority in the meantime.)
- Make sure you make time to reflect after sessions, trying to relate clients' presentations and the impact of therapy to the theory.
- When you prepare and go to supervision, use the theory to structure how you describe clients and your work together to your supervisor.

## References

BACP (2018). Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions [online]. *BACP*. [Viewed 11/6/21]. Available from: <https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/3103/bacp-ethical-framework-for-the-counselling-professions-2018.pdf>

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