



# Therapeutic Impasse

## Definitions

The word 'impasse' can have two particular meanings in the context of counselling and psychotherapy:

- Feltham and Dryden (1993, p. 89) define 'impasse' as 'an obstacle to progress' in the course of therapy.
- In gestalt psychotherapy, meanwhile, 'impasse' refers to 'when a person's customary supports are not available and new supports have not yet been mobilized' (Yontef and Jacobs, 2005, p. 315). They go on to describe this experience as one of terror, when the person feels they can't go back or move forward.

In this article, it is the first form of impasse that we look at.

## Frequency and Feeling of Therapeutic Impasse

Feltham and Dryden (1993, p. 89) point out that 'impasses in counselling are very common'.

Clients and counsellors alike may describe impasse as a feeling of being somehow 'stuck'.

## Client Reasons for Therapeutic Impasse

There are various possible reasons for therapeutic impasse, and the prevalence of each of these varies according to the stage of counselling and the therapeutic modality being used.

One reason for therapeutic impasse may be the client's resistance to the counselling process; this is particularly common in the early stage of counselling. Resistance may result from the client opposing the counsellor's efforts to help (and is particularly problematic when the client has not come to counselling of their own free will, instead feeling that others are expecting it of them).

In the middle stage of counselling, meanwhile, there are 'almost inevitable patches of misunderstanding and reluctance' (Feltham and Dryden, 1993, p. 89). In modalities that require clients to complete specific tasks between sessions – e.g. homework in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – there may be an unwillingness to commit to, complete and return this.

Similarly, as the end of counselling approaches (particularly when the number of sessions is limited by an external party, such as the agency providing counselling), clients may resist ending; this may possibly relate to attachment issues, or their past experience of loss.

Transference may also play a role in resistance, if the client subconsciously links the counsellor with a past figure in their life whom they feel the need to oppose.

Resistance may also be a form of 'self-obstruction in relation to change through discovery of painful or unconscious material' (Feltham and Dryden, 1993, p. 89). Therapy can bring forth difficult emotions and realisations, and it is natural to hesitate before moving further into these.

Some clients may struggle to accept responsibility for making change and for progressing, and be looking to the therapist to solve all their problems for them. They may be afraid of personal change.

## Counsellor Reasons for Therapeutic Impasse

Thus, while many reasons for therapeutic impasse relate to the client, it is important – when therapeutic impasse appears – also to look at ourselves as counsellors. Possible counsellor reasons for therapeutic impasse include countertransference and lack of skill (Feltham and Dryden, 1993: 89).

Egan (2002) urges therapists not to assume that resistance is always client-related, ‘since it may well point to the client’s justified dissatisfaction with the counsellor’s work’ (Feltham and Dryden, 1993, p. 163). He gives the following examples of the ‘push-back by clients’ (2002, p. 163) when they:

- ‘feel they are being coerced’
- ‘think that they are being mistreated by their helpers in some way’
- ‘believe that their cultural beliefs, values, and norms—whether group or personal—are being violated by the helper’.

On the last example, Egan (2002, p. 163) illustrates this with self-disclosure, noting that ‘since individual and cultural norms regarding self-disclosure differ widely, clients who believe that self-disclosure is being extorted from them may well resist’.

## Working with Impasses

How therapeutic impasse can be dealt with varies according to the unique set of causes behind it, and also to the modality. For example:

- CBT therapists might look at how clients’ thought patterns affect the impasse, and whether these can be challenged or their resultant behaviours changed.
- Person-centred counsellors might use the core conditions to enter the client’s frame of reference and to empathise with what is causing the stuckness.
- Psychodynamic therapists might interpret impasse, using the material generated through this process as ‘grist for the mill’ (Yalom, 2002, p. 70) to work through.

Thus, in all modalities, while therapeutic impasse may feel uncomfortable and challenging, significant learning and progress (for both client and counsellor) can result from taking the time to understand and tackle it.

Clinical supervision – and, if appropriate, personal counselling – are important tools in supporting this process.

## References

Egan, G. (2002). *The Skilled Helper*. USA: Brooks/Cole.

Feltham, C. and Dryden, W. (1997). *Dictionary of Counselling*. London: Whurr.

Yalom, I. D. (2002). *The Gift of Therapy*. Croydon: Piatkus

Yontef, G. and Jacobs, L. (2005). In: R. J. Corsini and D. Wedding, ed. *Current Psychotherapies*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Canada: Brooks/Cole. pp. 299–336.