



What Is Psychological Contact?

In 1957, Carl Rogers published an article in the *Journal of Consulting Psychology* entitled 'The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change'. He outlined six conditions that must exist between a client and a therapist for therapy to be effective.

Core Conditions and Hidden Conditions

Three of these conditions – empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard (UPR) – became known as the core conditions, although Rogers himself never used that term, which was coined later – in 1969 – by one of Rogers' students, Robert Carkhuff. Other terms used to refer to the core conditions are the 'facilitative conditions' or 'therapist's conditions'. The remaining three conditions are sometimes referred to as the 'hidden conditions', 'client's conditions' or 'lost conditions' (Tudor, 2000).

Psychological Contact

Of the original six conditions, the first one – 'Two persons are in psychological contact' (1957, p. 95) – seems to get very little attention, and Rogers himself makes only a brief observation on it (p. 96): 'The first condition specifies that a minimal relationship, a psychological contact, must exist. I am hypothesizing that significant positive personality change does not occur except in a relationship. This is of course an hypothesis, and it may be disproved.'

Psychological contact is multi-layered, and for this condition to be met, the therapist needs to pay attention to a number of elements in the relationship.

Client understanding of where they are and what they have come for

This may seem quite basic. However, for clients who attend under the influence of alcohol or drugs, it could be an issue. Some agencies who support clients in recovery from addiction state in the policies that anyone attending counselling must not have used drugs or drunk alcohol prior to the session. Also, some prescription medicines can leave individuals disconnected and disorientated. In cases like this, a therapist needs to decide whether or not the client understands what they are engaging in.

Language

Does the client understand you, and do you understand them? And is your and their understanding of the language being used enough to create a relationship where the client feels heard and understood? If you find yourself in a situation where you and your client are unable to communicate adequately in the same language, then using an interpreter or making an onward referral may be necessary.

Communication style

Even clients and therapists who speak the same native language and dialects may have different styles of language use. For example, a client who uses metaphor or simile may very well feel more connected psychologically with a therapist who understands and works with metaphor. The best connection the therapist can make is by adopting the client's preference, if possible.

Motivation

Is the client coming to you for therapy or for another outcome? For instance, they may believe that you can give legal or medical advice. Or a client may need financial advice either instead of – or before they are ready to begin – therapy. In this case, you might signpost them to Citizens Advice, for example. Another possibility may be that the client is looking for friendship – in which case, a befriending service may be a more appropriate form of support.

Client mental state

Psychological contact requires that both parties are in the same clear and present time. If the client is not, they may need a different form of support. A client who is having a psychotic episode, or one who has schizophrenia or memory loss, may be experiencing a different reality from that of the therapist. Although this may be a barrier, Rogers objected to the pathologising of such conditions (which relies on the medical model) and asserted that person-centred counselling could still be helpful. It would be important though to be attentive to the effect of the client's condition on psychological contact.

Race and culture

Differences in race and culture may affect how easily the therapist and client are able to establish psychological contact. Abdullah (2009) presents eight pairs of cultural dimensions, each of which reflects an aspect of how a client's cultural heritage might influence interactions in counselling. According to Abdullah, culture may affect how people relate with nature and the world, get things done, relate with others, are guided, communicate, interpret time, see themselves and others, and relate with any deity. If the client and therapist are from different cultures, this may hamper the establishment of psychological contact.

References

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