

Food counselling: are we what we eat?

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The practice of Humanistic Psychology requires a deep understanding of what it is to be human. One of the aims, possibly the only aim, of humanistic counselling is to enable the client to find out more about his own humanity so that he can take more responsibility for his chosen way of being.

We are what we eat, in the sense that the organic molecules we take in through our mouths are used to build and energise the body we inhabit. The food counsellor is aware of the role of food and eating in the life of the client, and will see it always as a direct metaphor for unconscious processes. For example the emotional starvation that the anorexic person arranges for herself is reflected exactly in the lack of nutrition: her refusal to build and energise her body with food is a refusal to exist at all as a person.

We all eat and use food to tell ourselves things, such as 'I am tired' or 'I need comfort'. These 'messages' are worth reading, and in particular counsellors who work with food should be well aware of their own dietary choices and eating habits. If we wish to find out more of what makes us who we are, then a good place to start is to observe what we eat. If we wish to be more responsible for our own lives, then we could start by taking responsibility for what we chose to eat. If we wish to change our way of being, a good place to start is to change our way of eating.

Observing the diet

A food counsellor begins with the facts about the client's diet and needs therefore to get to the truth. The challenge of a food intake sheet for the week can be frightening for someone with a pathological relationship with food. It may take several sessions for

enough trust to be built up to enable the client to tell the counsellor the truth about what they are eating.

It is not enough to let the client tell lies for a while and falsify the chart: rather, let there be no information at all if it be not the truth. This modelling of a fearless attitude to the truth is a basic principle of humanistic counselling, for it illustrates the acceptance and genuineness that characterises the relationship.

For the client to feel safe enough to speak about what is being eaten; for the completed sheets to be found acceptable (and the blank sheets also), is to form a good basis for the healing relationship in which the real work is done. Telling the truth is the first step towards healing, in my view. Revealing the truth requires courage and emotional support, but the airing of the truth brings with it that relief and rest that is so important in recovery.

Once the truth is out, then the inner self is revealed: the unhealthy diet is a lack of good self-nourishment, and is a metaphor for a lack of self-love. If the client's self hatred can be acknowledged and held without condemnation, then the gateway to change is already ajar.

Taking responsibility

Once the client is aware of the truth, there is no escape: unless he is being force fed, he is choosing every mouthful of what he eats and drinks. At every meal table each person eats a different diet, for we all vary slightly the ingredients we eat every day and at every meal. Sally likes carrots but Jason does not. Sally has dessert but Jason isn't hungry and leaves the table. Meanwhile, Mum eats the meal plus the leftovers later on.

There can be no responsibility where there is no awareness. A client may try to duck out of responsibility with the attitude of 'I don't know' or 'I can't help it.' There can be no awareness without real information. The food counsellor is well primed with good nutritional advice that will help the client to become aware of what they are eating.

In my work I use the 'real food' principle, and teach my clients to become aware of the basic constituents of their food. I may explain that a milk shake is made of cows milk and sugar, and a cheese sandwich is made of wheat flour and cows milk. In the process they learn to read labels and come to the sessions amazed at how many packaged foods contain sugar or salt. They often complain that shopping is taking far longer as they read labels before they make their choices, and that the whole business of eating has become so much more complex.

The work in the therapeutic relationship reveals to my clients that they are making choices about the way in which they select food for themselves. Choices are being made at several levels: which foods to buy; which foods will make a particular meal; how the food is to be prepared; how much of it to eat, (and for some, even how long the food will remain in the stomach.) This work with choice is very challenging, but once the choices are confronted, the awareness that real choices are being made is empowering to clients who have previously operated from a position of assumed helplessness.

Changing choices

Once the client is aware that they are free to choose any foods they wish, they can change their choices. The food cravings that tend to inhibit changes of diet are addressed with some simple dietary advice about blood sugar levels and the avoidance of certain foods that trigger cravings. The

heady feeling of control over the diet transfers to other areas of life:

Wives begin to complain to their husbands; men change their jobs; the spring-cleaning is done at last; the new activities begin. Underlying the spiritual and emotional benefits of this new awareness is the steadier energy and physical strength that is needed to do the job and which arises out of better nutrition.

Hidden within the positive upward spiral of a client making a change to a healthier diet is the issue of self-love. The client now sees that self-nurturing with good food in the right quantities is the way to feed oneself and also to love oneself. Life was never meant to be a banquet where we sit still and stuff ourselves. We need just enough food for the journey as we move on.

If you are interested in training as a food counsellor, a training course will be held in Hertfordshire in 2001. Details from 'Food and You' PO Box 396 St Albans Herts

Further Reading

Hayton A *The Food Addicts Diet* Headline 1991

Hayton A *Food and You Stage One Introducing the Four Zero Experience* Wren Publications 2000

Yalom I *Existential Psychotherapy* Basic books 1980

Althea Hayton trained at the University of Hertfordshire School of counselling and holds their Post-graduate Diploma. She works with individuals and groups on various issues, including problems with food, addictions, pregnancy problems and personal development. She is author of several non-fiction books and articles on various topics including addiction to food, the grief of pregnancy loss and the death of a baby. Her project "Food and You" includes study days on various food problems, handbooks, groups, individual counselling and training for food counsellors.

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