

An Introduction to Co-Counselling

Rose Evison

This article presents the co-counselling tool kit for personal growth. This includes the model of what human beings are like, some ideas on what stops us growing and basic strategies and techniques used by co-counsellors. While most co-counseling practice is common to practitioners, there are variations in the theory used as a supportive framework. The framework presented is drawn from that used by myself and Richard Horobin, though I've presented some comparisons with Harvey Jackins and John Heron. (For full accounts of their views see their publications). To facilitate dialogue with readers co-counselling jargon will be given in capitals when first met and thereafter with an initial capital.

The co-counselling model of what human beings are like focusses on how we interact with our environment; with the physical world and with other humans. We notice in our experience and in our observations of others, that we have two distinct modes of interaction with our environment. In one mode we respond flexibly to different situations; we take in information, evaluate it on the basis of our past experience and our current needs and then create an appropriate response. In the other mode we respond rigidly; we react to only part of the situation with the same response as we've used in the past. This rigid response is usually inadequate. (By response I am talking about **being** as well as **doing**: thoughts, feelings, muscular tensions are responses as much as actions.) In this mode both our experiencing and our acting are rigid.

Both the flexible and the rigid modes are part of human experience. However we can only grow and develop when acting in the flexible mode. Where we are constrained in rigid mode reactions they are powerful blocks to growth. Co-counselling clearly distinguishes between responding in the flexible mode and responding in a rigid mode. The jargon used is responding from the PERSON or responding from a PATTERN. Patterns are seen as distinct from the Person, parasitic on the Person even. This can be disconcerting as they can be the most visible parts of an individual. All the positive attributes of being human are assigned to the Person and individuals encouraged to equate themselves and others with their Person's and not with their Patterns.

The particular positive attributes emphasized vary between one theorist and another, but they all appear to be talking about the same things basically.

- Harvey Jackins talks about inherent human qualities and singles out having a vast intelligence, being zestful, and being naturally caring and co-operative with others.
- John Heron talks about humans being distinguished by personal needs: to live and be loved, to understand and be understood, to be self directing. He says infants have remarkable though undeveloped capacities for love, understanding and choice.
- Rose Evison and Richard Horobin talk about humans as successful social animals, not failed computers, and emphasize highly developed capacities for learning, and for caring and co-operation with others.

Using the model of individuals having a Personal self and a Patterned self, we can state that personal growth will result from any methods which enable individuals to alter the balance between flexible and rigid responses in their lives; to spend more time acting from their Person's and less time acting from their Patterns. Co-counselling has a variety of strategies and specific techniques which enable individuals to alter their Person/Patterns balance in favour of their Person. The core strategy in co-counselling is the disruption of Patterns by removing the motivational energy which drives them. This is agreed to be negative feelings, called DISTRESS in the jargon.

When in Distress, our bodies are geared up for some kind of action and our minds are preoccupied with the distress and its causes and consequences. We can describe the effect on our minds as our attention being trapped in Distress. Both effects are characteristic of negative feelings. In contrast with positive feelings, both minds and bodies are in a state where we have a lot of choice over what to do next - we have the abilities which go with being in our Person's.

How Do Patterns Arise and How Can We Disrupt Them?

Patterns arise from experiences in which we suffer Distress and do not end up in a positive emotional state - the experience ends with a problem being shelved rather than solved. In such circumstances we learn that those characteristics of the situation which are perceived to be causing the Distress, are a threat to us. When we meet those characteristics in the future, our memories supply the label 'threat' and we then react with the same negative feelings as before. This is called RESTIMULATION. The feelings aroused will push us in that direction which minimises our Distress. The only available responses for this are those of the initial situation, however inadequate. Our Distress pushes us in this direction quickly and without aware thought. Since we are still Distressed, our attention will be preoccupied by this and we won't have any attention for thinking of alternative ways of acting. We have become Patterned; we only pay attention to the distressing characteristics and we are locked into our previous inadequate response. Note that the new situation may not be threatening to us in reality, or we may now have the skills to change it, but we have no means of finding that out. Also the activation of the negative feelings and the Patterned responses, act to strengthen the Pattern.

Our initial distresses arise when we are children when we have inadequate knowledge of their causes. We will then tend to store all the memories of the situations with the label 'threat' and any of them can Restimulate us in the future. From this we can get generalisations which result in some Distress always being Restimulated. The resulting Patterns are labelled CHRONIC and we often equate them with an individual's personality. They correspond to Reich's character armour.

There are two ways in which Distressing events can end up with positive experiences. The first way is when we discover how to master the situation by actions which change it so that it's no longer threatening and unpleasant. The second way is when we DISCHARGE the negative feelings. Discharge is the name given to active processes which start with the individual in an aroused negative feeling state and end with them in a positive mind and body state. All humans are capable of Discharging and children do it spontaneously unless stopped by adults. Crying, shaking, raging, yawning, laughing can all be Discharge processes. The particular ones which take place will be those which go along with the experienced feeling, e.g. crying when the feeling is grief, raging when the feeling is anger.

We can Discharge Distress 2 minutes or 20 years afterwards. In the first case we don't become Patterned, in the second case we disrupt previously operating Patterns. This occurs because the end result of discharge is a positive feeling state, in which we can think about, evaluate and find solutions to the previously Distressing situations. Co-counsellors experience this happening spontaneously after Discharge and label it RE-EVALUATION. This phenomenon is so striking that it provided the name for the original co-counselling organisation. Re-evaluation is the operation of the Person, freed from the Pattern.

How Can We Discharge Stored Negative Feelings?

Since children Discharge more than adults we can look at them to see what conditions favour Discharge. We observe that children Discharge when the events that have upset them are no longer happening, but the feelings that were evoked are still present. Under these conditions the Discharge process happens spontaneously. Co-counsellors maintain that it also happens under these conditions for adults, but adults rarely experience the conditions. This arises because our culture doesn't recognise the usefulness of Discharge. We are told as children that showing emotion is weakness, a sign of childishness, of being out of control. These labels are applied to signs of Distress and to Discharge. Thus as children we are punished for Discharging. We internalise this and react to the beginnings of Discharge in ourselves as 'threatening', and hence establish Patterns which prevent Discharge. These are known as CONTROL PATTERNS and usually have to be disrupted before other Patterns can be worked on.

What are the conditions that favour Discharge in children? Firstly the negative feeling state is present in body and mind. Secondly the child is also aware that the conditions which evoked the feeling are no longer occurring, new Distresses are no longer being added in the present. Another way to express this is to say that the child's awareness is split between a distressed feeling arising from the past and a safe present. This state is called a BALANCE OF ATTENTION. Co-counselling theory says that this Balance of Attention is a necessary condition for Discharging Distress. A hypothesis arising from this is that all growth methods which value feelings and encourage people to get in touch with their feelings and express them, are using Discharge to break up old Patterns, and hence will be setting up Balance of Attention conditions in their methods.

Concepts which appear equivalent to the Balance of Attention are stated in other growth movements. Holden has a clear statement about the need for a Balance of Attention in order to primal in Primal Therapy (1). Martin uses an equivalent concept in describing Client Centred Therapy (2). A more general speculation is that the need for a Balance of Attention is what underlies the crucial relationship dimension, identified by Carl Rogers and confirmed by much research into one way counselling, namely Non-judgemental Warmth.

Practical Techniques to Aid Discharge

Co-counselling is used as an ongoing growth method by individuals who have learned the techniques, meeting in pairs. Each pair sets up a reciprocal relationship: agreeing to confidentiality and the available time being evenly split, both individuals taking turns to be in the counsellor and client roles. When being client, individuals take responsibility for working on themselves and when being counsellor they take responsibility for aiding the client maintaining A Balance of Attention. The co-counselling pair has a basic contract which helps ensure the counsellor's behaviour (a) doesn't add Distress to the client in the present, (b) contradicts the client Restimulations arising from other people. The first part is done by the counsellor agreeing no to offer any judgments, interpretations or advice about the client's life. The second part is done by the counsellor offering supportive attention to the client at all times. This is communicated through keeping eye contact when possible, through touch contact and through making interventions which are gentle reminders of the counsellor's presence when the client appears to have got lost in Distress. This provision of present safety for the client is crucial and the only necessary skill for the counsellor.

The counsellor can learn to help in other ways. If the client needs to alter their Balance of Attention, the counsellor can assist. The suggestions which can be used depend on the fact that our feelings tend to follow whatever we focus our attention on. If we focus on things which are new and good for us, we will find our bodies respond with positive feelings. On the other hand if we are asked to list the things which frighten us, we will find our

body state becoming one of fearfulness. Consequently if we are too distressed to Discharge, our counsellor can intervene to suggest something which will bring part of our attention outside the distress, using pleasant memories or the immediate environment as a focus. Equally when we aren't in touch with our distresses the interventions will focus on how to re-experience them.

There are a number of techniques which assist an individual to re-experience their distressing feelings. The most basic technique is that the individual is asked to talk through an upsetting event as if it was happening in the present, using concrete literal description. The more thoroughly this is done, the more the situation that was distressing will be evoked and the feelings experienced. This **PRESENT TENSE** technique can be aided by asking the client to repeat any word or phrase which appears to carry an emotional charge. They are asked to repeat the words loudly, to put energy into them, to involve their bodies and emphasise movements and gestures. If the client begins to experience specific feelings they can be encouraged to go through the particular movements which would occur if they were to start discharging. This **ACTING INTO** Discharge does often turn into genuine Discharge. These techniques and variants of them, can be labelled as intensifying the experience of Distress by **GOING WITH** the feelings.

Another factor that is present in the above techniques is that they involve the individual as a physical body, doing things which increase the level of bodily arousal. This is what is happening when emotionally charged phrases are said louder and with Acting Into processes. In fact all cocounselling techniques involve people physically, contrary to some critics' opinions. Arousal helps us get into Discharge because those feelings that we can Discharge are ones with a high level of arousal. Since Patterns involve muscular tensions, chronic muscular tensions often represent that aspect of a Chronic Pattern through the use of bodily stimulation. As the client gets into the Distress then the muscular tensions often represent that aspect of a Chronic Pattern. This means it is possible to begin getting in touch with that Chronic Pattern through the use of bodily stimulation. As the client gets into the Distress then the other working techniques are used. It is easy for the client to lose their Balance of Attention with these techniques, so in co-counselling they aren't recommended until the client is skilled in maintaining that for themselves.

Another type of technique for getting in touch with negative feelings is by **GOING AGAINST** the feelings. One way this is done is by looking for and enacting physical and verbal **CONTRADICTIONS** of Distress. The techniques in this area are particularly powerful - perhaps because the individual using them will have a Balance of Attention with a strongly felt Distress being balanced by a strongly enacted Contradiction. An individual may find herself saying, as part of a counselling session "I'm no good at making friends". She can be encouraged to think of what the opposite of this is, then to try and express it in a concise form of words, without any qualifications. As in the earlier techniques she is encouraged to involve her body - saying the Contrad-

iction loudly, with the appropriate actions. In this case it might be "I make friends everywhere". If part of the individual's attention and body state goes along with the Contradiction, the deeply felt Distress is intensified and Discharge usually results.

Contradictions and other words and phrases which can be used to get into Discharge without talking through events are called DIRECTIONS. Directions are used for Going Against Patterns. There is a lot to be gained by working on Patterns when possible, instead of on single upsetting events. This is because the Pattern while Restimulating Distress in a single event will also be operative in many other situations in our lives. Sometimes we can identify Patterns directly. Otherwise they come out of working on Distressing events. Identification of Patterns can be hastened by using ASSOCIATIONS, to pick up events with the same Pattern.

There are many ways of using Associations - we can follow up a random association, move to our earliest memory of a similar event, or set off to recall all the events that seem to fit in with a Distressing theme. Examples of the latter might be: sexual events, partings, new places, embarrassing moments

When we have been using a Direction to Discharge during a counselling session, we can take it into our lives and use it there to disrupt the Pattern when we get Restimulated. This is called **HOLDING A DIRECTION IN LIFE**. Directions which produce laughter are particularly useful for this as laughter is usually socially acceptable. In our lives the Discharge need only be a token of what it has been in sessions. This will still be sufficient to enable the individual to interrupt the Pattern and go on to make an alternative response to the Patterned one.

These techniques represent the core of the Discharge strategy which is basic to Co-counselling. There are however other strategies, supplementary to Discharge which are important. These strategies can be called **WORKING FROM STRENGTHS**. This means using the times when one is working from one's Person and capitalising on them to shift the Person/Pattern balance. Each strategy will be considered in turn.

CELEBRATION

In this strategy we celebrate the skills and states of being which are already part of our flexible Person. This means noticing recalling appreciatively the times we are acting with flexible intelligence, zest, and caring attention for others. All aspects of our lives can be utilised. We may list "Times I've been creative", "Times I've persevered", "What I like about my body". As with the other techniques the suggestion is to affirm the celebration in posture, gesture and tone of voice. Sometimes we may work with one particular Celebration and aim to get our total self involved in it.

We may make Celebration posters for ourselves, use Celebratory Directions in our lives, Celebrate non-verbally through dance, movement and other expressive arts.

By Celebrating at times when we're not sunk in Distress we can build a strong and integrated Person, with readily available skills. From this position it is easier to identify Patterned thoughts and feelings for what they are and work against them in sessions and in our lives, rather than be unwarily taken over by them. It follows from this that Celebration is a useful activity at the beginning of a co-counselling session; provided the individual isn't too deeply into Distress, when getting straight into Discharge is likely to occur. At this point, celebration is a reminder of the distinction between the Person and the Patterns and assists the individual to have confidence in their own ability to work on themselves - part of their attention staying with their Person throughout. Celebration can also be used to evoke skills which will aid in dealing with the particular Distress areas the individual wants to work on. These skills will be strengthened. Similar considerations apply to Celebrating at the ends of sessions: If I can Celebrate those things about myself which are going against the patterns I've been working on, I'm decreasing the chances of being caught in the Patterns in that area. I am also building support for alternative responses to the Restimulatory events involved.

John Heron recommends these techniques under the label of **THE WAY OF CELEBRATION**. In Re-evaluation Counseling, Celebratory techniques aren't presented as part of a coherent strategy, but in practise the techniques are recommended and used. RC magazines are full of Celebrations of self and others.

Learning New Skills

This is a strategy involving creative thinking and acting both within the counselling arena and in people's lives. In its purest form it is the application of the post-discharge state of zestful intelligent potential for thought and action to changing our lives. All varieties of co-counselling emphasise it's importance, though there are differences of approach.

- For Harvey Jackins the emphasis seems to be on using the techniques of this strategy outside co-counselling sessions. Techniques recommended include Holding Directions in life, short and long term goal setting, thinking all the time "There is always at least one elegant solution to every problem." It is worth noting that rational thinking or logic which is held up as the goal of the Person all the time, does not mean cold emotionless logic - it includes zestfulness and caring for other people.

- John Heron calls this strategy **THE WAY OF ACTION**. He includes: problem solving by creative thinking; goal setting, short term and long term; cultivating awareness of emergent goals. John recommends using

time in co-counselling sessions after discharge for these activities as well as at other times.

- Richard Horobin and Rose Evison call this strategy **TARGET PRACTICE**. They define it as "exploring what it is like to be the person we want to be, using creative thinking and acting within a co-counselling session. They would include future roleplay activities along with the areas mentioned under John Heron.

Where this strategy is pursued within co-counselling sessions, it can provide vital links with changes people wish to make in their lives. The learning of alternative responses can start in sessions, under optimum conditions and is then easier to continue in the rest of life.

Finding Myself Through Co-Counselling

Anni Townend

Over the past two years I have been using the methods of Co-Counselling to increase my self-awareness. More and more I realise that I am in control of my own life; I am able to recognise my feelings and most importantly, own them.

For example, when someone tells me to "go away", I check myself from saying "you make me angry, you are hurting me when you tell me to "go away" and I say "I feel angry and hurt when you say "go away".

Sometimes I have no idea why I feel so upset when something happens and it is only either during or after a co-counselling session that I can understand the connections. I enjoy learning about where my feelings come from.

In the above example, I know, now, that "go away" is connected with 'going away' to school. Once I know why I feel so strongly about something and have freed myself from the past connections, I can deal with the present in a much more clear and creative way.