

The divorce rate is staggering - over 50 percent of the population. Often a mental health counselor will be going through a divorce at the same time as providing counseling to someone in a similar circumstance.

We all have been taught that for a counselor to be effective, there needs to be a personal bonding that establishes a sense of relatedness between counselor and client. The client learns to feel safe and willing to share. The counselor is empathetic and may possibly relate to the client's problems. The counselor creates new perspectives for the client to try on. The client gains insights and develops a new point of view. The counselor assists the client in achieving flexibility on pressing issues and thus enables the client to move on. The client has developed a healthy change in behavior and point of view. Goal achieved! This is an ideal situation - simplistically serving our purposes.

A counselor going through major interpersonal and lifestyle changes induced by a divorce is vulnerable for a breakdown at all therapeutic stages. Ideally, the mental health counselor who is divorcing should probably not be doing counseling with divorcing clients. My personal bias (from experience) at minimum is that if you are going through a divorce, you should also be in counseling yourself. This provides a safe space for handling your personal issues and perhaps minimizes any transference which is likely to occur.

Bonding breakdown

A preoccupied counselor will not bond as effectively with the client. If a counselor is tied up handling personal issues, the counselor might not be present enough to establish an effective client relationship. A counselor who is successfully processing personal issues in personal therapy will more easily let go of personal reality and get the important work done with the client.

During the bonding process, a serious possibility for breakdown can occur. A client may share a sensitive issue corresponding with the counselor's issue. Counselors could get stuck in sharing their own personal experiences and shift the session to work out personal issues. This is where the counselors lose their own personal boundaries as well as the crucial value of counselor sharing. Clients should not have to pay for working on the counselor's personal

issues.

The second potential breakdown point is when the counselor's issue is so reactivated by the client's issue that the counselor chooses to avoid it at all costs. This eliminates the client's ability to explore a key issue and to achieve a new focus or resolution. A well meaning counselor may be ineffective in handling a client's problem if it is very similar to the counselor's own situation.

The next potential area of breakdown occurs when the client's issue is where the counselor is stuck on personal issues. The counselor then matches the client, and both are in agreement about how bad the situation is. Neither one is able to provide the necessary grease to shift point of view. Obviously this does not assist the client toward resolution. This could also reinforce the client's stuck position by getting such strong counselor agreement. This makes further resolution or reframing more difficult for the client. The counselor in this situation has failed to create new openings with the client. Hopefully, the counselor will recognize this and agree to address this issue more effectively in a following session. The counselor can also refer the client to someone who would be more effective if not able to readily address and deal with the situation through personal counseling.

The major pitfall that mental health counselors who are going through their own divorce face is not being able to let go of personal problems. This prevents them from being fully present with their clients. The client's reality is one of being stuck in a "survival mode" where they are unable to let go of their problems. When counselors are too consumed with their own personal issues, they lose their ability to stand in someone else's experience. This gift of understanding clients from their point of view is something the counselor is privileged to provide. If counselors are too caught up in their own lives, they will be unable to provide this gift. Counselors need to recognize their need to be in personal counseling in order to maintain their effectiveness as change agents.