Helping the Reluctant Client to Engage in Counselling

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The reluctant or resistant counselling client is a common though frustrating client for many school counsellors. A number of techniques designed to aid reluctant clients to engage in the process of their own counselling are described. While most counsellors would agree that all clients should enter counselling voluntarily and free from all forms of coercion and threat, it is nevertheless common for school counsellors to find themselves faced with clients who may need and desire help, but are involuntary, reluctant to, or reticent about engaging in the process of counselling. Faced with these clients, counsellors can choose to accept the reluctance at face value, i.e., as an unequivocal refusal to help. Alternatively, they can sensitively and non-judgementally attempt to engage the client in order that the real meaning of the reluctance may become clear. It may well be that many reluctant clients need only to find genuineness, reassurance, and the right invitation from a counsellor to begin a relationship.

Although given brief mention in most standard counselling texts (see, e.g., Belkin, 1975; Brammer, 1979; Brown and Brown, 1977; Hamblin, 1974; Munro et al., 1979; Patterson, 1974), resistant, reluctant or involuntary counselling clients remain unsolved riddles to most school counsellors. Even the numerous attempts that have been made to clarify both the process of counselling and the teaching of counselling skills (e.g., Carkhuff and Pierce, 1977; Egan, 1975; Ivey and Gluckstern, 1974; Kagan, 1975) have included only brief discussions of specific techniques that could be used to engage reluctant clients in the process of counselling; the same is true of Calia and Corsini's (1973) critical-incidents approach to school counselling.

By contrast, Vriend and Dyer's (1973) discussion of reluctant clients is a comparatively thorough discussion of the forms of reluctance, of possible reasons for reluctance, and of strategies for counselling reluctant clients. Their suggestions for dealing with such clients include:
(a) questioning the source of the reluctance;
(b) dealing with the behaviour as it is manifested;
(c) interpreting the reluctance;
(d) exploring with the client his/her circumstances;
(e) explaining the counselling process;
(f) negotiating mutually-agreed behaviour contracts.

Accepting the widely-held view that successful counselling of necessity involves some degree of voluntary client participation (Patterson, 1974; Vriend and Dyer, 1973), this article expands Vriend and Dyer's list of techniques designed to aid reluctant clients to engage in the process of their own counselling. Implicit in any discussion of techniques is the necessity for counsellors to be patient, open, non-judgmental, and creative in their approach to reluctant clients. When working with such clients, it is essential to allow them time to feel comfortable and develop trust, to refrain from pre-judging clients' moods/motives/needs, and to try out more than the normal variety of invitations to talk or participate.

The techniques discussed below are categorised as follows: (1) interpreting the client's silence; (2) encouraging non-verbal responding; (3) working at the client's pace; (4) responding to the talkative reluctant client; and (5) explaining the counselling process. The authors have had success with all of the techniques in actual counselling with adolescents. It should be stressed, however, that counsellors must decide for themselves when it is appropriate to use these techniques. In all cases they should be used tentatively, sensitively and with due concern for the real needs of the client. As with all counselling techniques, they are open to abuse and misuse, and counsellors should regularly monitor how frequently they are being used and for what purposes.

(1) Interpreting the client's silence
Initially, confronted with a client's silence, the counsellor should try to assess what the silence means for the client, and some of the reasons for the behaviour. The following techniques describe ways in which the counsellor might begin to do this.

(a) Silence can express many things: anger, fear, boredom, contemplation, reverence, respect, embarrassment, solitude, sadness, contempt, defence, hostility. Silence may also indicate that the client does not understand the language the counsellor is using. Since it can mean so many things, there is a risk in judging too quickly what a particular silence means. Counsellors should make every attempt to understand, and become more sensitive to, the possible meanings of silence.

(b) In doing this, particular attention should be paid to the client's movements, gestures, and physical appearance. Counsellors should attend to these feeling indicators and comment on them, even though the client might not respond. Simply reporting what is observed can result in the client agreeing with or correcting the observation. Either way, the client has been engaged.

(c) Interpreting clients' feelings can also be accomplished by written means. For example, when clients do not respond verbally, they may respond to a written observation or a simple drawing. When using written messages, counsellors should write simply and briefly, in large letters and in full view of the client. Such messages can usefully be supplemented with drawings. For example, the counsellor could write a simple message such as ‘How are you
feeling?', and draw two faces, one sad and one happy. The client is then free to respond to either of these techniques in a minimal, safe way. With imagination, this sort of communication can be continued until the client feels secure enough to interact verbally. When this technique has been used, typical reactions have varied from interested, though minimal, non-verbal responses (a gesture or pointing to the appropriate face), to obvious amusement and a fuller response (talking or writing/drawing a follow-up message). Seldom have clients failed to respond in some significant way to this form of communication. 

(d) Mirroring as a form of interpretation can be used to highlight dominant aspects of the client's behaviour. In this technique, counsellors imitate movements, gestures, or postures that seem meaningful. Counsellors should realise that mirroring can be a provocative form of interpretation, and may elicit a strong response, positive or negative. Such responses tend to be unpredictable but may include anger and denial ('That's not me!'), resistance ('That's me if you say so!'), acceptance ('That's me all right'), and understanding ('If that is me, I want to change'). Some clients immediately recognise a game they have been playing and abandon it, becoming more willing to relate honestly.

(2) Encouraging non-verbal responding

Although similar to some of the interpretation-of-silence techniques, the following suggestions are intended to encourage the client to initiate exploration and self-disclosure without having to verbalise thoughts or feelings. They are invitations to interact rather than counsellor interpretations of client behaviour.

(a) It is often effective to invite clients to draw or write thoughts or feelings they find hard to verbalise. Doing this may enable them to clarify their thoughts or feelings, when spoken words would be impossible or inadequate.

(b) A more structured exercise would involve asking clients to write a slogan that typifies how they see themselves or present themselves to others. If they seem interested, but reluctant to act, counsellors could offer their own interpretation, watching closely to gauge clients' reactions to this form of feedback. For example, the counsellor might write a slogan such as 'Kick me' or 'I don't understand'. If carried further, such simple descriptions usually contain additional messages that are kept hidden. Often they clarify the first message. To illustrate, 'Kick me' might be followed by 'I like it', and 'I don't understand' followed by 'It's safer that way'. This technique is based on the Transactional Analysis concept of 'sweatshirts' – an ulterior message communicated to others that usually involves a game (see James and Jongward, 1975). Once the game or ulterior message is understood, more constructive ways of communicating can result. Most clients, even angry and defensive ones, will be interested enough in this form of information about themselves to continue the interaction with the counsellor in some way. A variation of this technique is for the client to complete sentences presented by the counsellor. For example, 'When I go to school, I feel . . .' and 'When meeting new people, I usually . . .'. Clients can complete these sentences by themselves and then talk about them when they are ready.

(c) If the client is willing, there are a number of problem/attitude/feeling checklists that can be used to enable clients to indicate areas of concern. However, if clients will fill out a checklist, they will usually interact with the counsellor in other ways. An example of a problem checklist is the Mooney Problem Checklist (Gordon and Mooney, 1950).

(d) Clients can be encouraged to express thoughts or feelings physically: e.g., by acting, miming, or posturing. Almost any verbal message can be communicated physically in a way that makes the meaning more clear and direct. The counsellor's tasks are to be persuasive enough to encourage clients to express themselves non-verbally, and perceptive enough to understand the meaning of such actions.

(e) Having once engaged clients to act out thoughts or feelings, counsellors should have them exaggerate specific behaviours. Repeating a gesture with emphasised movement may aid clients to clarify its meaning and the personal feelings that lie behind it.

(3) Working at the client's pace

Many counsellors, pressed by time and institutional demands, quickly become frustrated with reluctant clients. Whether expressed verbally by the counsellor or not, clients will sense this frustration from a variety of cues: facial expressions, voice cues, and non-verbal actions. Therefore, it is essential that counsellors exercise patience and open-mindedness with reluctant clients. Counsellors must accept the fact that these clients need more time. In some cases, dealing with the reluctance indirectly will foster trust and the development of an appropriate relationship.

(a) Counsellors should try taking reluctant clients for a walk, doing some small non-counselling task to do; allowing them to remain while the counsellor continues with other work. In these situations, counsellors should always explain what they are doing and why. The initial focus does not always have to be on the reluctant client's problem. The client may simply need time to get to know and trust the counsellor enough to begin talking.

(b) Clients can be asked to bring photographs of self, family or friends, that they are willing to share. Even if they refuse to discuss the photos they bring, clients have been engaged in a significant way. Some of the techniques described earlier can then be used to comment on and interpret photo contents.

(c) Another means of structuring initial sessions with reluctant clients, similar to techniques used by Hamblin (1974) and Rainbow (1977), is for counsellors to invite clients to respond to situational cards which depict certain life situations. For example, pictures or cartoons depicting a happy family scene or
a typical school can be used. Counsellors should prompt clients to respond by asking such questions as: 'What do you see?' 'How does this make you feel?' 'How is this like your situation?' Typical reactions to this technique have ranged from indifference and/or confusion ('Dunno, can't see anything there'), to tears and/or distress ('Our family is never like that one!'), to understanding and insight ('Yes, that's Dad: that's really like him'). Whatever the response, the counsellor has learned more about the client.

(d) If clients are agreeable, they can be given some small task to perform before the next session. A bit of 'homework' may encourage them to cooperate long enough to see what the counsellor has in mind. An example of a homework suggestion would be to ask clients to keep brief diaries of certain behaviours, thoughts, or feelings until the next session. The purpose of the homework should be described, emphasising that sharing the contents is entirely voluntary.

(e) If things do not progress well, the counsellor can try changing seating positions and/or activities. Examples are swapping chairs with the client, moving to another room, beginning another activity. In some cases a mere change of position or activity will result in clients being more willing to interact.

(4) Responding to the talkative reluctant client
Not all reluctant clients are silent clients. Some will readily verbalise feelings such as anger and hostility, or interact in over-compliant or evasive ways. The effect is the same: avoidance of meaningful contact with the counsellor. Most of the suggestions listed below involve interpretative or confrontative qualities, and counsellors should avoid using them in an aggressive, interrogating manner.

(a) As in the case of the silent client, counsellors should pay particular attention to the talkative client's movements, gestures, and physical appearance. These factors may reveal information about the client's circumstances that can be commented on directly or used to interpret the talkativeness.

(b) The manner in which a client speaks may reveal as much as what is actually said. Since the voice contains many clues as to a person's feeling state and beliefs, counsellors should be sensitive to voice quality and use such information in framing a response.

(c) In many instances it will be productive to have clients repeat particular statements, phrases, or words. This repetition, preferably with added emphasis, can serve to highlight underlying feelings and to clarify meanings.

(d) Counsellors should notice when clients use 'need' when what is really meant is 'want'. Seldom do clients need something/someone in order to continue functioning. 'Need' implies helplessness, while 'want' implies autonomy and the ability to change. This difference can be pointed out, and clients asked to repeat their statement using the appropriate word. Similar attention can be given to differences between 'you' and 'I', 'we' and 'me', 'can't' and 'won't'. The intention is to have clients personalise their statements and take responsibility for them.

(e) The counsellor can point out to clients the difference between the 'passive' voice and the 'active' voice. Use of the passive voice implies that the client is being controlled by others. Use of the active voice places responsibility and power to control where it belongs, with the client.

(f) Discrepant behaviours can be pointed out in a non-judgemental manner: e.g., where what clients say conflicts with what they do; or where what they say conflicts with what they feel or how they look. While many counsellors feel this confrontation technique is risky, some risk often has to be taken with reluctant clients to avoid losing them altogether. In taking such risks, counsellors should act on their 'hunches' about underlying messages and feelings by checking their accuracy with the client.

(g) If video-tape equipment is readily available, clients can be asked to view themselves and comment on what they see. This situation may be threatening for some, but at the same time, it allows both counsellor and client to refer to more objective evidence to explain their observations.

(5) Explaining the counselling process
In some cases, clients' reluctance to engage in counselling can be largely overcome by explaining the counselling process, how it works, and what the client can expect from the counsellor. Not only does every client have a right to this information, but such client role-induction has been shown to result in enhanced outcomes (Orlinsky and Howard, 1978).

(a) In using any of the previously discussed suggestions, it is important that counsellors 'think aloud': that is, explain what they are doing and why. The mere fact that counsellors are prepared to reveal their motives, intentions, thoughts, and feelings, can act as an incentive and model for the client to do likewise.

(b) Similarly, counsellors should explain the process of counselling to clients in simple, non-technical language that demystifies the process. Doing this with all clients, not just reluctant clients, may help to allay clients' fears, doubts and hesitations about the process of counselling.

Conclusion
This list is not to be considered exhaustive. The suggestions we have outlined should be regarded as possibilities which indicate the range of counsellor behaviours that are possible if the reluctant or difficult client is approached with patience, open-mindedness, sensitivity and creativity. We wish to add, however, that failure to engage a reluctant client is not necessarily the counsellor's failure. Provided counsellors are sensitive, perceptive and creatively responsive when working with reluctant clients, they do not have to...