

## Peer Counseling: A Counterculture Healing Process

"Gina" a client of mine, was a really lovely, likable human being but she found herself alone and isolated much of the time. She worked hard on her own issues but found connection mysteriously out of reach in terms of solid, stable groups of friends and community. At the same time, she has fears and old patterns around making herself vulnerable, reaching out, getting close to others because she judged her own feelings as "too much" and "too intense" and "too different" than everyone else. This created a catch 22 situation; she desperately wanted connection but wouldn't take a risk towards it for fear of being rejected. Traumatic rejection, of course went way back into her family history and her whole defense system was organized around avoiding the same experience.

So...in comes Peer Counseling (often referred to as Co-counseling. I use Peer Counseling because it is my own version of the Co-counseling form), a practice of sitting with another person, splitting the time (for example 20 minutes each) and offering a non-judgmental container for good listening and being held in high regard. One person listens and the other person shares and then you switch. Skills around emotional release are taught in Peer Counseling to help your client (the person sharing) to allow feelings to be expressed. Feelings that have been held in, shamed, dissociated, and shut down are invited to bubble up and be shared. Clients learn to identify core feelings such as anger, fear, shame, happiness, and sadness. Release of these feelings can come through crying, shaking, sweating, yawning, laughing, raging, or talking in an insightful way. Feelings that seem to be about your present life are also encouraged to be explored as something historical for you as well, something from your childhood, something that has been in your body for a long time. Counselors get skilled at asking how current feelings and problems remind clients of "old" material so that a pathway from the past to the present is made. Connecting childhood issues with present day issues is a huge foot in the door for shifting life long stuck patterns.

I encouraged Gina to join some Peer Counseling classes. This was a

big step for her. She had grown so used to hiding her pain, hiding her loneliness, that stepping out into a weekly class felt like a big pattern breaker in itself. She began slowly learning the skills of Peer Counseling- how to "hold space" for another person who is sharing feelings and to allow her own emotions and issues to be witnessed at a peer level. This is an essential aspect to note: creating a peer practice of support offers a whole other set of benefits as compared to working with a therapist.

1) It levels the playing field and creates an equal relationship of support and connection

2) It heals peer-to-peer wounds by creating a very clear container where a certain level of intimacy and respect can be expected

3) It empowers both client and counselor to take charge of their own healing processes. Peer counselors can counsel as much or as little as they need. Weekly or daily check-ins with your Peer Counselors can be built into your lifestyle so that you can lean into the experience of being heard, supported, seen, and being cared for.

Gina's shame around her too-muchness began to shift because she found that the people listening to her were enthusiastic and compassionate. The structure of Peer Counseling contradicted her patterns of being rejected. She began to take the judgment off of the fact that she had so much to share, so much to express. This was in part because she saw others expressing at the same level and partly because her own shut down mechanisms has begun to soften and move. Also, she began working directly her on historic material around rejection. She released deep, old feelings about neglect and at the same time found her counselors present and understanding of what she had lived through. This began a shift in Gina's ability to get close and stay close to others.

Peer Counseling is not a cure-all or a fix-it plan. It is a PRACTICE that supports human, heart-centered connection. It is a lifestyle of giving and receiving loving kindness. It invites the range of expression that has been systematically oppressed by our culture and continues to be. It is a radical departure from the divide-and-conquer structures that trickle down from societies power structures (ok, that's my next blog entry...don't get me started). It offers us a chance to experience the profound restorative and creative benefits of expressing how we feel! If we can't feel, we can't really feel our lives. If we are isolated, we cannot

thrive. If we are silenced, we cannot give what we need to give. If we can't express fully, we cannot fully love.