

Understanding and Managing Client Resistance

Clifton Mitchell, Ph.D.

How you conceptualize client resistance determines to a large degree how well you will handle it. Typically, resistance conjures up ideas of stubbornness, obstinacy, defiance, hardheadedness, rigidity, opposition, etc. However, there is little benefit from conceptualizing resistance in this way. When you place negative labels on your clients, you move into a position of stuckness with your clients.

The most insightful and useful definitions of resistance come from the social interaction theorists. From this perspective, resistance is defined as, "...psychological forces aroused in the client that restrain acceptance of influence (acceptance of the counselor's suggestion) and are generated by the way the suggestion is stated and by the characteristics of the counselor stating it" (Strong & Matross, 1973, p. 26). Here, resistance is seen as something that results from the interactional style of the counselor and the client. The counselor *allows* the client to form a mutual communication pattern that hinders counseling and the change process. This view of resistance forces the counselor to remain aware of what he/she may be doing that actually promotes resistance. The great benefit of this perspective is that changing your interaction style results in changing what has been deemed resistance. This perspective empowers therapists.

In order to further clarify and expand upon this idea, imagine that you were to create a rough hierarchical list starting with the least forceful and moving toward the most forceful methods to influence clients. It might appear something like this:

least forceful	completely non-directive
	indirectly suggest
	directly suggest
	provide advice/educate
	confront
most forceful	punitive force

Understanding the differences in these level of influence allows one to conceptualize and define resistance as a mismatch between the therapist's mode of influence and the client's current willingness to accept that mode of influence. Thus, effective therapy hinges upon therapists using an appropriate level of influence with regards to clients' current state of mind. With highly resistant clients, it is critical to be on target with the method of influence you use relative to their current degree of acceptance of your approach. Resistance is created when the method of influence is mismatched with clients' current propensity to accept the manner in which the influence is delivered.

Clients who display what appears to be resistance do not, for some reason, want change in the manner prescribed by their therapist. In order to subvert therapist influence, clients must expend energy as they focus on not coming under another's control (i.e., resistance). In reaction to clients' reluctance to accept their influence, most therapists try even harder to influence. As therapists' attempts to influence increase, so do the clients' rationale and inner need to circumvent this influence. A vicious cycle is formed that is fueled by the escalating attempts of therapists and clients to not be influenced by each other. Often, what originated from an inappropriate method of influencing intensifies into an arduous battle of wits.

In such relationships, it is as if clients and therapists are in a tug of war, each pulling harder on their end of the rope in order to drag the other across the line into submission. Each is exerting considerable effort to force the other to give in and agree with the opposing perspective. The result is that clients are reinforced by the secondary gain of not having to face their struggles and change, and therapists are exhausted and approaching burnout in their work.

The way out of this cycle is to avoid directly fighting clients' positions. Stop pulling the rope and join clients on their side of the line. Upon doing this, there is no reason for clients to focus on and expend

energy to oppose therapist influence. This same energy is now free to be used for other pursuits. Once this is accomplished, a more suitable method of influence can be established. Typically, at such junctures, therapeutic influence that is indirectly presented has a much better possibility of shifting perspectives and behavior.

Clients only have so much energy to focus on the difficult struggles before them. Therapists do not need to do anything that diminishes the amount of energy available for the therapeutic work at hand. When therapists apply mismatched methods of influence with clients, they increase resistance and decrease the energy available for change.

"An effortless yielding of one's agenda is a major signal to the client's unconscious that here is a person I do not have to resist."

Ron Kurtz, 1990, p. 60

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