

**Trainee counsellor
Nicola Davies, a lifelong
rescuer herself, explores
the critical differences
between rescuing and
counselling *Illustration*
by *Laura Carlin***

I have been rescuing people for as long as I can remember. My mother was my first 'rescuee' and I would have done anything to make her happy. It was a mission that would inevitably fail; no child can rescue an adult from their own misery. This didn't deter me, however, and I later went on to try to rescue all of my peers. Other children would actually book appointments to secure some of my lunch hour so they could cry on my shoulder. I was in demand – all because I could listen.

Thinking back, it is not surprising that I am now training to be a counsellor. Indeed, I am sure many counsellors have a rescuing tendency. This isn't a bad thing. In fact, if recognised, the motivation to rescue can be harnessed to offer a nurturing environment where our clients can learn to rescue themselves. My aim in this article is to explore that critical difference between rescuing and counselling.

What is rescuing?

Does being a counsellor help ease your feelings of insignificance and powerlessness? Does helping clients give you a sense of purpose? Do you become deeply distressed when clients reject your help? Do you sometimes keep things from your supervisor because, even though your actions might not be standard practice, you consider them to be in the best interests of your client?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, then you could be confusing counselling with rescuing.

So, what exactly typifies a counsellor who takes on the role of rescuer in a counselling relationship? I've looked at the literature and discussed these issues with my fellow counselling trainees,

some of whom have kindly agreed to share their thoughts here. These, I think, are some of the key features.

For the rescuing counsellor, their primary motivation to become a counsellor is entwined with the long-standing need to rescue others; they believe this is what counsellors are supposed to do. Counselling clients is an automatic extension of their desire to save others; it is the identity they assume as counsellor. They don't want to admit that, deep inside, they feel insignificant and emotionally powerless. They've realised this from childhood but have always denied it. It makes them feel good to save others, because it gives them a sense (albeit false) of omnipotence and power.

They think they know what's best for the client – after all, they have the theoretical knowledge and skills to prove it. They get along well with clients who are compliant and see it as a sign that therapy is going well. They regard non-compliant clients as wayward children who, in time, will see the error of their ways and succumb to their guidance.

They never challenge their client, partly because they don't want to alienate them or cause them emotional distress. The counsellor needs the client to help them complete their rescue mission. They often give clients advice, and see them as victims of their circumstances rather than as independent decision makers. As one fellow trainee admitted: 'I don't know if it's a rescuing thing within me but it has been a learning curve not to tell options.'

The rescuer counsellor will go to extreme lengths to try to fix their client's problems and protect them against discomfort and pain – making

Counsellor to the rescue

themselves available to a client seven days a week, 24 hours a day – even if it means transgressing ethical boundaries. They believe their actions are justified because they are motivated by a sense of what is good for the client, and will resist or fight against supervisors who think otherwise.

Their ability to get clients to trust and confide in them is quite refined. Indeed, others can learn from them how to create a warm, welcoming and empathic environment very quickly. Touching or hugging clients is quite natural for them and they don't see it as a problem in terms of maintaining professional, ethical boundaries. When clients reject their help they find it deeply distressing. It signals that they aren't as capable as they thought they were and that they have failed in their mission or 'calling' to rescue.

Recognising the rescuer within

There are two types of rescuing counsellor. For one, being a rescuer has been part of their character since early development. Others can find themselves compelled by their client into taking on the role, even though being a rescuer is not typical of their personality make-up.

The counsellor who can recognise that the client needs them to play the role of a rescuer is generally in a better position to deal with the phenomenon. If they are conscious of a client's projections, the counsellor can maintain an awareness of boundaries and make deliberate decisions about how to go forward in counselling. The danger – in so far as the counselling process is concerned – lies with counsellors who don't recognise that they are adopting the role of rescuer with a client: it is who they are and part of their personality. Indeed, there can be huge amounts of denial about having 'white knight syndrome' – after all, acknowledging this means a lot of self-development is needed.

So, how do we recognise ourselves as rescuers in the context of a therapeutic relationship? Counsellors who don the cape of rescuer are typically likely to be good at making eye contact and creating a warm, trusting, emotional environment, and don't shy away from touching or hugging clients.¹ They are likely to sit close to the client and hardly ever criticise or make negative comments about the client or the client's actions. They are completely on the side of the client and will never challenge them, no matter how irrational or self-defeating the client's behaviours. Even

when the rescuing counsellor becomes aware that a client is taking advantage of them and is abusing their desire to help them, they are likely to continue to find justifications to maintain the relationship.²

Counsellors who rescue will do anything for clients; they will even see them outside counselling sessions if the client needs them. It's also not uncommon for the rescuing counsellor to give their private telephone number to a client. Some may even help their clients with chores, such as going shopping on their behalf, or settle their bills. However, not once will the rescuing counsellor challenge the client or prompt the client to begin to make personal and behavioural changes. Indeed, it is the nature of their emotional involvement with a client that can quickly cause them to lose objectivity in the relationship.³

The counselling profession, by definition, involves the impulse to help and support those who seek psychological therapy. It is the ideal environment in which the impulse to rescue someone from their personal troubles can flourish. It could be argued that most, if not all, counsellors offer therapeutic support to others because doing so makes them feel good. There is nothing wrong with this, since it is the primary motive behind all healing professions, and also the underlying motivation for all kinds of occupations.

Even so, most counsellors understand from their training that it is not their task to save clients from whatever brings them to therapy, whether clients come because of problematic relationships, addictions or low self-esteem or because their life feels meaningless. Professional, experienced, effective counsellors offer, or make clients aware of, the choices available to them so that clients can decide whether to pursue them or not.⁴ However the counsellor who sets out to deliver a client from emotional troubles and misery makes decisions on behalf of the client, or unwittingly compels the client to pursue options that they have already chosen for them. As another fellow trainee pointed out to me, 'The true rescue is allowing the client to rescue themselves.'

Typically, rescuing counsellors come to the profession with the impulse to rescue already awakened and acted on long before they even considered training to be a counsellor. This is not to deny that the profession, by its very nature, has the propensity to turn otherwise well-meaning, non-rescuing individuals into the rescuing type. After

all, counselling is inevitably going to appeal to people who are motivated to reduce others' distress. The important point to keep in mind is that effective counsellors help clients solve their problems by clarifying and exploring options. The rescuing counsellor, by contrast, takes on the client's issues and wants to solve them on their behalf. They want to protect clients against anything that might bring them pain, even if the client's own behaviours and choices are responsible for their misery.¹ As a fellow trainee counsellor admitted, with great honesty: 'I was a terrible rescuer when I first started my training. I wanted nothing more than to make everything better for my client, all stemming from my own inability to be uncomfortable and want to get through the pain to the "good part". I had to learn that there is room for growth in pain and that experiencing it in a safe and controlled environment helps it to not come back.'

It's plausible to assume that the effective counsellor operates from a desire to help, and that doing so makes them feel significant. In fact, the need to rescue is motivated by an underlying, and often unacknowledged, profound sense of powerlessness. Counsellors who want to rescue clients mean well, but they often end up bringing more emotional harm to clients, and are rarely aware of doing so – primarily because they are trapped inside their own pathology to save others. The rescuing counsellor reduces their own sense of powerlessness while unintentionally increasing the powerlessness of clients.

Consequences for clients

Counsellors who attempt to rescue clients and protect them from the painful consequences of their actions inadvertently encourage them to abdicate responsibility for their lives. Emotionally immature clients in particular don't get the opportunity to make progress since someone else – the mothering counsellor – assumes almost all responsibility for their actions. Hence, in this situation the help-seeker doesn't feel the necessity to try to change aspects of their actions that are problematic. When clients aren't challenged by counsellors to reflect on how they might be contributing to their own problems, it can help to entrench and strengthen the client's rationalisations and denials, which are part of the reason why they came for therapy in the first place.

A rescuing counsellor also makes it easier for a client to continue to externalise the sources of their troubles.

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Clients will continue to blame others, including the counsellor, for the things that go wrong in their lives. Since they don’t have to reflect on their own actions and take responsibility for them, they don’t feel the need to change. If they pursue a particular path of action, as maybe suggested by the counsellor, they can always blame the counsellor if it doesn’t turn out right. In short, counsellors who rescue clients help to infantilise them; psychologically, their clients remain like children who don’t feel the need to grow up.

Counsellors – indeed anyone – who habitually want to save others tend to believe they are capable enough to undertake these rescue missions. They convince themselves that they are emotionally stronger than those who seek their help. To the extent that this personal philosophy guides their actions and attitudes, rescuer counsellors never stop to reflect on the hidden sense of powerlessness that underlies their impulse to rescue. Many hate to admit that their attempts to save others are indirect efforts to save themselves from awareness of their own emotional issues. This is where self-awareness is fundamental, as a fellow trainee said: ‘The need to rescue comes from my own need to feel useful and be “the good guy”, so recognising that wanting to rescue was very self-centred and often not very helpful to the client helped me learn how it is important for me to be aware of it. By being aware I can step back from it.’

Consequences for counselling

There are consequences too for the counselling process. In counselling, the rescuer typically adopts a maternal stance, which puts the client into the role of compliant child. Since they believe that what they are doing is best for the client (their child), the values and ethics of the profession are pushed into the background, often unconsciously. These counsellors may even ignore supervision or lie to supervisors to protect their rescuing role; they believe that, because they are acting in the best interests of the client, their actions are justified.

Eventually, the counselling relationship becomes one in which the client develops a dependency on the counsellor. This is no longer a relationship of two autonomous adults but one in which an all-knowing, well-meaning mothering figure counsels a troubled child. Clients who resist this role are often abandoned by the counsellor or made to feel guilty for being disobedient – again, often

unconsciously. Some counsellors may even reveal more of their own personal history in an effort to convince the client that they understand what the client is going through, based on their own experience. It doesn’t enter the rescuing counsellor’s mind that their efforts to provoke an empathic response from clients might lead to crossing professional and ethical boundaries. In many, if not most instances the relationship takes a disastrous turn for both – the counsellor ends up feeling burnt out and the relationship has to end; the client feels abandoned and possibly worse off than before.

The thin line between counselling and rescuing is one of many reasons why supervision and personal therapy are fundamental for counsellors. Both will help the counsellor realise - and this is going to be a great challenge for the rescuing counsellor - that what they are doing is not in the best interests of clients or their own best interests. Personal therapy in particular will help rescuers gain an awareness of the fact that they can’t ignore the need to take care of themselves any longer.⁵

Am I able to put my rescuing tendencies aside when I take up my counselling role? For me, letting go of my rescuing tendency completely would be like having a personality transplant. Instead, I attempt to remain self-aware and use supervision to ensure that I keep the client at the centre of the therapeutic process – even if, as one of my fellow students confessed, I need to ‘sit on my hands to keep quiet instead of rescuing’. ■

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