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ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL "TOTAL COUNSELLOR" IN A SOCIETY OF SELF-ACCLAIMED COUNSELLORS

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ABSTRACT:

In spite of the development around the world, it appears to be getting more and more difficult in most settings in the country for individuals to confide in or share personal problems with people who claim to be professional counsellors/therapists. This is as a result of the proliferation of counsellors and the counselling profession in Nigeria. The aim of this article is to beam a search light on the role of the "Total Counsellor" who serves as a therapist in Professional counselling. The skills, competencies, qualities/characteristics and ethical issues in professional counselling were examined. The total outcome of counselling were based on personal experiences of authors in certain settings in the country. Conclusions and recommendations were made on how to strengthen a profession that does not seem to have been totally accepted in the country.

Keywords: *Total-Counsellor, Therapist, Professionalism, Proliferation, Competencies.*

INTRODUCTION

Professional counselling appears to be under serious threat in a country where counselling services are offered by "everyone" whether they are qualified or not. Religious organizations, the social media (print and electronic) and many other sectors have "counsellors" who offer counselling services in diverse areas of everyday life (E.S.R.C, 2016). It is very common to go to religious settings, organizations, family settings and the social media, to hear people advertise their services as professional counselling services. These services are supposedly offered by "professional counsellors" or experts in counselling.

Counselling and psychotherapy involves the display of high level of skills, competencies and qualities by the professional counsellor/therapist. The ability to listen attentively without interruption, while clients discuss their problems, and work with counsellors

either to find solutions to these problems or to find relief in being able to confide in a professional who is not partial or judgemental, trustworthy and capable of maintaining a high level of confidentiality, are all attributes that only a professional therapist can display. Sometimes clients visit counsellors not necessarily for the therapist to tell them what to do or to provide a solution to problems but in order to talk about their problems (verbalization) to someone who is willing to listen without conditions. The majority of clients are relieved when someone lends a listening ear.

In professional counselling and psychotherapy, clients attend regular counselling sessions, usually on a weekly basis (Therapy WebGenie, 2016) and for between fifty minutes to sixty minutes (CIC. EAP, 2016) depending on the therapist. This can only be done by someone who is well grounded in counselling, not only by acquiring certificates but having experience in the profession. Counselling and psychotherapy are professions that are aimed at helping and assisting individuals to work through their problems. Therapists and counsellors focus on the problems of people and encourage them to talk about what they are going through and assist in suggesting likely solutions to the problems. Clients play a big role in doing this. The era of technology has not helped the proliferation of the counselling profession. People now have opportunities to access counselling through the internet (Mitchell and Murphy, 20).

Professional counsellors are faced with enormous tasks of creating awareness in the best way they can to make their presence felt; not in the school setting alone, but in all organisations. Everyone needs counselling and no one should be deprived/ prevented knowingly or unknowingly from enjoying this beautiful service which can impact positively into the life of mankind.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

This section contains personal and real life experiences of authors of this article in the school setting, religious setting, home/family setting and organizations (national, international, public and private sector, small, medium and large scale enterprises).

THE SCHOOL SETTING

The authors had contact with a youth aged fourteen who had missed out in education and was interested in going to school. He came from the village where he did not have the opportunity of formal education. The proprietor of a schooling in the neighbourhood was approached in order to enrol the young boy in the school, to know how best he can be helped and what stage would be best for him to start. The boy had a sponsor. Rather than encourage the young boy and put in place the modalities for admitting the young boy into school to fulfil his dreams, the school owner was more interested in why the boy was showing sudden interest in formal education, and what he

expected to benefit from acquiring formal education. The school did not offer the young boy admission; he was also never invited to speak with the school counsellor (if there was any). The young boy missed the opportunity of fulfilling his dream, until circumstances made him return to his village.

In another school setting, (primary school), parents/guardians were asked to pay between 50-100% more than the cost of the entrance examination into secondary schools. The fee according to the school owner is to facilitate the admission process of their wards into the non-fee paying secondary schools in the neighbourhood. Parents and guardians have no choice but to pay these illegal levies in order for their wards to get into secondary schools.

RELIGIOUS SETTINGS

A young man who claimed to be in the health care delivery sector was in a religious gathering to "give a health talk". While delivering his lecture, he displayed the photographs of two important personalities and mentioned that in spite of their level of education, they could not save themselves from certain ailments they died of. He had told the congregation that he was at the occasion with a team of experts which included a counsellor, and that the members of the congregation could meet them after the talk for tests. After the talk, the members of the congregation were given an opportunity to ask questions and a number of them wanted to know if the speaker/presenter had obtained permission from the family of the individuals whose photographs was displayed? The speaker had not obtained permission and hence was unable to give an answer.

In another religious setting, a five year old child who was the son of the head of that religious setting slapped a married man who had a child of the same age. A teacher in charge of the children witnessed the incident and wrote to the governing body of the religious organization to plead with parents to instil discipline in their children. In writing the report the teacher cited the incident above as one of the examples of the bad behaviours witnessed by the teachers. However this teacher was prevailed upon by the senior teachers of the group to delete the example cited because he was the child of the head of that religious setting, and was told to include and mention the name of another child who had been found stealing because they did not know who the parents were.

FAMILY SETTING

Four young children between the ages of seven and fourteen were on holiday in the house of a close relative. The ten year old among them went out to play and by the time the child returned, lunch had already been given to the other three children. When the

child asked for some food, the relative said "those who delight in going out to play do not get to eat good things" in this case the good thing was food.

An eight year old child was sent to the home of a close relative to explore the opportunity of going to school. In addition to the harsh conditions faced by the child in the home of the relatives, the child was also denied the opportunity of going to school in spite of being very intelligent and passing all the qualifying examinations.

ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

An organization with international affiliation was having problems with some of its young employees. They were suspended from work with the promise that they would be absorbed if they showed signs of reformation and were ready to abide with the rules and regulations of the organization. Two of these young employees took the initiative and sort the help of a psychotherapist. After a reasonable number of sessions and with remarkable improvement, the employees were reabsorbed. Six months after they were reabsorbed, all the young employees were relieved of their duties. Those who sort help and those who did not.

In 2013, a company organized qualifying tests for new intakes. After three stages of recruitment exercises, the company embarked on a documentation process and then sent out mails to those who had not qualified thanking them for their participation on the exercise. As for the others, they were told that they had qualified for the job. However they did not receive any mail or confirmation of employment from the company. So they were made to wait in limbo. Up till now that is their current situation.

Twenty-three young Nigerians who applied for jobs in the Nigerian immigration service, lost their lives when they went for the recruitment examination more than one hundred others sustained various degrees of injuries (Abimaje et. Al, 2014).

There are more personal and real-life experiences from such sectors as the hospitals, banks, academic institutions, maritime and transport sector e.t.c. these problems will continue in a vicious circle until real professional total counsellors are recognised and welcomed in every setting so they can bring their wealth of experience to bear on the various areas in every sector. This may bring some sanity into every sector and likely result in high level of productivity.

THE TOTAL COUNSELLOR

A "total counsellor" is a true professional counsellor who is equipped with strong counselling skills and competences and processes all the qualities and characteristics of a professional counsellor. A professional that fits the above description would have the

expertise to provide counselling in all the sectors mentioned above (school, family, religious settings and organizations), because of a well-grounded understanding of all areas of counselling.

SKILLS AND COMPETENCES OF A PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLOR

The following skills and competences that a professional counsellor must possess in handling individual and group challenges will be very useful in addressing the problems that come up in all sectors in the country and also the environment. Such skills and competences include but are not limited to:

- Active listening: for clients to trust the counsellors enough to reveal the root of his/her problem
- Restating: to provide support and clarification of the problem
- Clarifying: to arrive at a meaningful understanding of what is being communicated
- Questioning: to increase clarity and focus
- Empathizing: to encourage deeper levels of self-exploration
- Facilitating: to help clients reach their own goals
- Evaluating: to help clients have an awareness and understanding of the direction in which they are moving
- Suggesting: for clients to develop alternative courses of their thoughts and actions
- Protecting: to warn clients of possible risks and reduce these risks
- Disclosing: to create trust and to demonstrate ways in which clients would reveal themselves to others
- Terminating: to help clients assimilate and integrate what they have learnt in order to apply it to their daily lives (Omoegun and Olayinka, 2004; Nwadinigwe and Makinde, ; Olusakin and Ubanga,)

QUALITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF A TOTAL COUNSELLOR

A total counsellor has special qualities and characteristic traits, holds on dearly to the ethical principles of the profession and is able to hold the right attitude and have a strong faith in the client to the point of displaying the following attitude towards the clients;

- Congruence: genuine professional feelings towards the client
- Empathy: entering the client's private world
- Positive regard: accepting the client without being influenced by unacceptable behaviours displayed by the client

- Un-conditionality of regard: accepting the client without reservations, conditions, evaluations or making judgements.

The qualities and characteristics of a total counsellor includes;

- Neat and smart appearance
- Regularity to work
- Punctuality
- Devotion to duty
- Friendliness
- Moral uprightness
- Ready to learn
- Ready to adapt
- Ready to handle clients private affairs and keep secrets (confidentiality). (Omoegun and Olayinka, 2004).

Ethical principles guiding the practice of professional counselling and which only a total counsellor can strictly adhere to, are stated below:

- Counsellors should stick to their own area of expertise/ professional competences
- Clients of other counsellors should not be enticed for counselling services by other professional colleagues
- Ethical issue of confidentiality is of utmost importance
- Findings should be clearly and accurately presented
- Psychological tests should be correctly interpreted
- Family members and close friends should be referred to other colleagues to avoid bias
- The rights of clients should be respected
- The counsellors personal values should not be imposed on clients
- Counsellors should not take advantage of clients or the counselling situation.

CONCLUSION

Personal and real life experience have been narrated in this write-up. Only a professionally trained total counsellor would have been able to provide adequate and professional interventions in all the sectors. For example, provide counsel on how the

family stories may be interpreted as child abuse; maladaptive early life training and background, favouritism in the religious setting; lack of well-trained guidance counsellors in the school setting to offer appropriate guidance services to avoid the possibility of litigation from those affected by the incidents in the organisational setting.

It is doubtful if there is any regulation of the counselling profession in Nigeria which is likely to be the reason for the proliferation of the counselling profession. It is clear that the counselling profession has been grossly misunderstood in many sectors in Nigeria where there is some form of awareness, there is unwillingness to engage the services of professionals because of the financial implications. It appears that a bleak future awaits the profession.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Professional counsellors, through their associations (local and national) and through interactions will need to create more awareness to members of the public. The use of the word "counsellor" by all and sundry needs to be checked.

It is doubtful if there is any regulation of the counselling profession in Nigeria. This is likely to be the reason for the proliferation of the counselling profession.

Steps should be taken by the professional association to ensure regulations, certifications and licensure for any professional counsellor who wants to practice. This will prevent un-professionalism.