

Working with Resistance in CPE: This I Believe

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Supervisors Have Anxiety and “Issues” about Student Resistance – Can Feel “Personal”

- Can raise my anxiety/challenge me around my personal issues:
 - My naivete/expectations (you don't love CPE like I do??)
 - My identity as a helper and desire to “help” student grow (what do you mean, you don't really want to grow?)
 - My need to be insightful, knowledgeable, competent (my insights don't change your life?)
- Though it may feel “personal” —the resistant issues arise from the students' learning —non reactive response is goal

Assumptions and Beliefs I Hold about Resistance

- I understand resistance as: self-protecting responses to perceived danger, threat, pain, discomfort (in CPE, primarily emotional, spiritual threats)
- We all resist things that may cause us significant discomfort/anxiety—“wired in” to being human
- Related to other types of defense mechanisms: denial, avoidance/flight, rationalization, projection, etc. — all ways to avoid pain/struggle/discomfort

Assumptions and Beliefs I Hold, con't.

- All of us—are ambivalent about learning
- Learning and growth means both
 - excitement, energy, growing competency, meeting important goals, feeling less anxiety
 - loss, face new scary tasks, feelings, ideas—change of self and identity
- Two sides to coin of learning
 - resistance
 - motivation and desire to change/learn/grow

Why Do Students Resist Learning?

- They are scared/anxious; new role, new environment, new people
- Students begin to encounter their “learning problems”
 - “Complex ways of acting and responding (in this clinical/education environment) that are determined not by the objectively ascertained needs of the patient but by the characteristic, automatic—and therefore at times, inappropriate—patterns of response of the would-be helper”. (Ekstein & Wallerstein, 1958, p. 137).
- These “characteristic and automatic” responses come from:
 - shaping influence of family of origin issues
 - personality traits
 - current learned ‘operating principles’
 - maturity/differentiation level
 - self image and identity
 - spiritual beliefs that influence behavior
- Common struggles with helping/helplessness; personal/professional authority; pastoral assertiveness; being/doing

Reasons for Student Resistance, con't.

- Students also begin to experience their “problems about learning”
 - “the predisposition to react in apatterned way...may be projected into the relationship with the supervisor as a characteristically limited way of reacting and of learning” (Eckstein & Wallerstein, 1958, p. 139)
- Behaviors related to problems about learning --resistant behaviors which also arise from personal patterns of being
 - denying the reality of supervisor or peer group feedback/insights (warding off supervision)
 - being submissive and agreeable to all feedback/challenge
 - being the “A” student who does everything “right”
 - reacts with shame and ‘mea culpa’ when confronted
 - can’t think of anything to talk about in supervision or peer group
 - is helpless, doesn’t understand what the problems are—you tell me
 - skeptical of the CPE/educational /group process—it’s all artificial
 - feels the supervisor isn’t really competent to help them

Reasons for Student Resistance, con't.

- A negative interpersonal dynamic can arise between the student and supervisor –impasse/anger/distance
- Student resistance may increase as process unfolds (and student is not rescued from the program expectations)
- When resistant, student behaviors can be challenging, and if I get “hooked” , I may get reactive
- This may exacerbate resistance—despite my efforts at self-management
- While imperfect, I am the supervisor they have, and a learning task is to learn from/use me in their learning process
- If I feel responsible for student’s issues, I will not be objective about their problems about learning and be less likely to be helpful with them

How I Work With Resistance

- I try to develop a positive learning alliance—I am “for” the student and want to support their learning
- I want to provide a relationship which supports courage in students—so much in CPE takes courage
- Growth=care + confrontation (D. Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Confront*)
- My goal is to provide a supervisory relationship characterized by:
 - **Truth**—what I observe, think, feelings I have that are relevant to disclose
 - **Trust**—be myself, genuine, admit mistakes, be reliably present/accountable
 - **Clear expectations** – boundaries, program/role expectations clear, consistent messages and behaviors

How I Work with Resistance

- As students struggle, temptation may be (for me, student or group) to remove or “lessen” the challenging task or expectation or boundary (=rescuing!)
- Use boundaries/expectations of chaplain role, outcomes, their own learning goals – they are accountable to them—they are “reality”
- Keep the dilemma alive – the student must struggle with the task/issue which presents them with problems/anxieties-- which I believe fuels the motivation to learn

How I Work with Resistance

- I seek to understand feelings/behaviors—especially those that are ‘resistant’
- Use active/empathic listening skills—what is fear/anger/frustration about? I want to assist their awareness of the personal places where resistance arises
- I want to be curious – take a “research stance” – ‘go to the balcony’ to gain (and help student gain) objectivity and ability to think

How I Work with Resistance

- Offer feedback/ confrontation re: resistant behaviors (supervisor and group)
- “Speaking the truth in love”; “holding up the mirror”
- I want to help student learn: what is the impact of resistant behavior on their pastoral care/ patients/ peers/ group? Encourage peers to give their feedback.
- Use of self: do I know anything about their dilemma? Would it be useful to share that?

What if There aren't "Good Enough" Changes in Resistant Behaviors/Attitudes?

- **Personal & professional goals for learning --
"Stuck"/little/no movement despite use of feedback,
exploration, and stated student desire to grow**
- I believe it indicates student is "*not ready*" to learn in this area—reflects the limitations of personal developmental/maturity/integration level of the student
- "You cannot push or verbally bludgeon your client into genuine change...Clients change when they decide to change." (Mitchell, 2009, p. 9)
- "It seems you are not ready to change this. When you are ready, you will."
- Can free me from over focusing on the issue.

What if There aren't "Good Enough" Changes in Resistant Behaviors/Attitudes? Time to Discuss Probation/Dismissal

- **Necessary Behaviors for Program Participation: Stuck/no movement/significant negative impact on the group or other relationships:**
- In my experience, probation/dismissal has occurred rarely, but usually around significant and ongoing difficulties with:
 - lack of participation in group/giving/receiving feedback/self-disclosure
 - not using supervision/bringing issues to supervision
 - 'distrust' /hostility to me as reason student cannot learn/grow/participate
 - emotionally unable to participate
 - complaints from staff/patients
 - **not willing to attend to problems raised is bottom line**
- "You're not able to engage in these behaviors but they are necessary for participation in CPE, so it's time discuss going on probation/leaving the program".

Supervisor's Issues about Probation and/or Dismissal

- Personal anxieties that may cause me to be reluctant to act:
 - my need to be competent – or seen as competent
 - Is it OK for the student to fail? (do I think it is my failure?)
 - is a grievance in my future?
 - caretaking of the student/feeling too responsible for their problems
 - rescuing student from 'reality'
- I understand this as a situation that calls for my courage to do the hard thing but what I have deemed is the right thing
- It may be a necessary but painful step in learning for the student
- I trust that this can be redemptive for both the student, the group and myself—we can learn and grow from it

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