

Chapter Five

ENCOUNTERS WITH COUNSELLORS RELATIONSHIP SERVICES – WHAT’S IN IT FOR FATHERS?

by
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Debate on the issues around fathers, families and fathering has thrown up extensive analysis and critiques of the social, political, and economic constraints fathers experience in New Zealand. Yet while these structural and social policy issues are acknowledged and efforts are made to address them, fathers continue to relate their experience of systems and procedures that appear to work against them. This suggests that there are flaws in the ‘system’ that need to be addressed.

Relationship Services is one organisation providing services within New Zealand’s social service system. We are contracted to provide counselling through the Family Court, and individual and group programmes for protected persons and respondents (both men and women) under the provisions of the Domestic Violence Act. Relationship Services is part of the system that some men can sometimes find oppressive and punitive.

Is Relationship Services therefore part of the problem for fathers and fathering?

This paper sets out some background on who we are and what we do, and describes how we ensure that the services we provide are respectful towards men and supportive of fathers. It refers to the values that underpin our work, the framework that informs our approach to people and their situations, and addresses some of the concerns fathers have expressed about what happens when they become clients. The paper offers an outline of the principles and beliefs held by people who work for Relationship Services: it does not speak for counsellors or other professionals who work with families outside the organisation.

WHO ARE WE AND WHAT DO WE DO?

Relationship Services is a fully professional not-for-profit national organisation offering professional counselling and education programmes from thirty offices and seventy community locations throughout New Zealand. It has been operating for nearly 50 years, initially as Marriage Guidance. Services include relationship counselling for individuals, couples and families, who may be seeking to maintain and enhance their relationships, or to resolve issues and solve problems, as well as Family Court counselling and domestic violence education programmes. Group education programmes are also available, and cover topics such as couple and family relationships, managing change, parenting and self-development. In a few parts of the country specific courses are offered by men for men on manhood or fathering.

WHAT VALUES ARE IMPORTANT TO US IN OUR WORK?

The counselling profession has a core set of values that are universally recognised and enshrined in codes of practice and in the articles of professional associations. The following statements are those values that are particularly prized by Relationship Services. The full range of values is included in Relationship Services' Counselling Practice Framework, and Code of Ethics.

Clients are the experts on their own experience

This belief is really important. It means that counsellors work with the client's version of reality and do not judge whether it is realistic or good or bad. Some questions might be asked, about what the client thinks or feels about this reality, but above all the client and what he or she says is to be respected.

Counsellors strive to be fair, and to demonstrate their fairness. There is no agenda to collude with either partner during the break-up of a marriage or partnership. If there is no joint interest or commitment to resolving problems in the relationship then the focus shifts to helping the couple find their own joint solutions to the problems of separation. Neither do counsellors hold a brief for 'saving' relationships. It is what the clients want and what they can agree upon that are the important issues, and the counsellor will facilitate the process of working towards these agreed goals.

The clients' wider environment is as important as their intimate relationships

Relationship Services' approach to counselling is laid out in our Counselling Practice Framework and part of this document describes the systemic approach which is fundamental to our work. While counselling usually takes place in Relationship Services' rooms the counsellor is aware of all the realities the client may bring to the session, whether they are about his family, his social community, or his work environment. Exploring these elements with the client through respectful enquiry is one way the counsellor can help him discover the patterns and themes in his life and relationships, and identify those parts which might offer solutions to his problems, or find ways to understand his situation differently.

Client self-determination

If the client is the expert on his own experience then there is no question that he is not also in control of making decisions or choosing appropriate solutions to the issues he is facing. The role of the counsellor is to facilitate a safe and structured process which can offer the client support to achieve his chosen goals. Of course there may be constraints impacting on the range of options available to him, but being directed by the counsellor is not one of them. Sometimes the process will involve considering new information or evaluating alternative ways of viewing himself and his relationships.

However, Relationship Services counsellors' commitment to client empowerment is always tempered by a strong and active stance against all forms of violence and abuse.

Relationship Services is not neutral: we stand against violence and abuse and work for respectful and caring relationships.

Family violence is perpetrated primarily by men against women. It is a serious societal problem reflecting historical belief patterns about hierarchical power relationships and inequality between men and women within couple and family relationships. Relationship Services counsellors acknowledge that many men have to struggle to break out of the patriarchal structures and roles they have been socialised into.

In any counselling session attention is paid to the clients' physical and emotional safety. Counsellors will challenge evidence of unsafe behaviour and promote behaviour which is beneficial and safe for all involved. If choices are considered by the client which may lead to violent or abusive behaviour these will be confronted in a constructive way. The safety of children is paramount, and their needs in relation to safety risks will be met before the needs of their mother or father or other significant family members.

Relationship Services offers seven violence prevention education programmes throughout New Zealand. These include group and individual programmes, for men and women and for the perpetrators and the victims of violence and abuse. Most participants are referred by the Family Court, but some choose to refer themselves so they can enhance the quality and safety of their lives and relationships.

Within violence prevention education programmes, violent and abusive behaviour patterns are clearly defined. Understanding of these patterns then leads to a focus on finding safe ways to live for the future.

Change is possible

Relationship Services counsellors believe all people have the capacity to fulfill their own unique potential. As change agents counsellors offer their professional knowledge, skills and experience to facilitate change processes and support clients to achieve their chosen goals.

WHAT SAFEGUARDS ENSURE THESE VALUES ARE UPHELD?

Relationship Services has standard procedures for quality assurance, professional staff development and performance review, ensuring that these take place in ways that support our counsellors and group facilitators to deliver high quality professional services. Our supervision policy and complaints procedure are integral parts of this package.

Supervision

Professional supervision is mandatory for all Relationship Services counsellors and group facilitators. It is a 1:1 process whereby a qualified and experienced supervisor or consultant reviews with the counsellor the process they use when working with their clients. It is a way of ensuring safe and ethical practice, of offering coaching in professional development, and of dealing with personal issues that may arise for the counsellor in counselling sessions.

Supervision can pick up on a counsellor who appears to be “telling the client what to do”, or “siding with one partner of a relationship”, or who is not giving due consideration to the wider world in which the client lives.

Complaints procedure

Complaints about the quality of services are taken very seriously. Our complaints procedure, available on request from our offices, sets out the purpose and procedure to be followed to ensure a fair and impartial assessment. Relationship Services is concerned to protect its professional reputation, and to ensure that concerns clients raise about the nature or quality of the service they have received are properly investigated and resolved in consultation with the clients concerned.

WHAT IS RELATIONSHIP SERVICES APPROACH TO FAMILY COURT COUNSELLING?

Relationship Services has a substantial contract with the Department of Courts to deliver counselling services to Family Court clients. We have a strong commitment to ensure counsellors undertaking this work have the specialist knowledge and skills required to carry out their work confidently and competently. We provide detailed procedural guidelines, which set out standards required and provide a step-by-step outline of the process and procedures to be followed.

Yet despite the care that is taken, some men find that things go wrong in this process. One or both parties may not be ready or able to consider future arrangements about their relationship, or about issues of custody and access for their children. In some circumstances one party may not be able to participate safely in joint resolution discussions because of a serious power imbalance within the relationship, and/or serious safety risks. There are also times when one partner makes a clear choice not to participate in counselling. There may be questions of confidentiality where other professionals are involved. Actions by family/whanau may cut across the intentions and agreements reached by the parties in counselling.

Unfortunately, most of these issues are beyond the influence of the counsellor. What Relationship Services can do is to minimise the impact of these risks by keeping closely to the carefully developed guidelines we have in place for this purpose. In terms of confidentiality, reports to the courts are strictly factual, indicating understandings reached or otherwise. No details are released to the Court about the counselling process or the parties' respective positions in relation to issues still in dispute. In the case of third party professionals no information is passed on without the express consent of the parties. It is worth noting that unless there are exceptional circumstances it is Relationship Services' policy not to accept two-location referrals that involve a non-Relationship Services counsellor – thus protecting the consistent approach which Relationship Services seeks to maintain.

In the matter of family/whanau involvement, the Family Proceedings Act (1980) does not allow for people other than the applicant and respondent to be involved in the counselling process. While many people do consult with their extended families, the counsellor has to make it clear that such consultations are not part of the counselling process. If people wish to involve their children in the decision-making process then they need to have explicit written approval from the Family Court.

All of this may be small comfort to fathers who believe the Family Court procedures have worked against them. However, the information above may help to pinpoint the stage at which things went wrong, and enable them to ask Relationship Services or the Family Court to investigate the events that occurred.

WHAT IS RELATIONSHIP SERVICES' EXPERIENCE OF WORKING WITH MEN?

Given that 70% of Relationship Services counsellors are women it might be assumed by some that men receiving services would be subject to a feminist bias. This view may be understandable if put forward by a client who feels he has been disadvantaged in some way, but it is not a reality. Relationship Services ethical values outlined above specifically contradict it. Indeed many women counsellors enjoy the challenge of working with men who are reluctant to confront issues in their relationships, just as male counsellors enjoy working with women. It is the quality of the counselling that matters, not the gender issues – unless for a specific case they get in the way. Should this happen the ethical and professional issues which result need to be dealt with in supervision.

Reports from counsellors and group facilitators around the country indicate a diversity in the way men make their first approach to our organisation. In group courses for couples on communication or enhancing relationships it appears that many men come along at the request of their enthusiastic partners. Once their initial reluctance is overcome they are able to recognise the relevance of the course for themselves.

It is fair to say that more women seek counselling on their own initiative than men, but there are a significant number of men who want improve their relationships and actively seek assistance when help is needed. Some need to test the water by getting an obliging mother or family member to make the initial appointment for counselling. Relationship Services is reluctant to make appointments through a third party as there may be particular issues that need to be taken into account in allocating a counsellor to the client, and in ensuring a convenient appointment time. We acknowledge it takes some courage, first to recognise that help is needed for personal issues, and then to do something about it. Relationship Services is committed to ensure that our male clients have a positive and constructive experience through their contact with our organisation.

What these comments illustrate is the strength of a traditional culture which continues to prevail for Kiwi men. "Men are providers, women are nurturers" is the dominant ethos, and this belief perpetuates stereotypes of men who do not disclose their feelings easily, and who struggle to express themselves in intimate relationships or to

demonstrate empathy with their partners. It is very heartening to note that pockets of change are occurring. One such example is a course on fathering, run for men, by a male Relationship Services counsellor in a rural area. The programme facilitator describes the great needs men have to talk about being sons, and how readily they come to share deep personal experience in the group, and what this can mean for them as fathers. There is also recognition of the commonalities shared by participants as men, even though their social environments outside the group may be very different.

On another front, a group of men who recently completed a domestic violence prevention programme for men who had been violent in their relationships, were so changed by the experience they just had to share what they had learned about themselves with the next group. Most of the men in this programme are referred by the Department of Courts, and some come of their own accord, often as a result of individual counselling. It is also worth noting that the course is facilitated by a man and a woman. The woman's point of view is appreciated by the group, as a way of seeing how they really are with their own partners.

WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE?

Relationship Services will continue to offer its current services. We wish to do more.

Next year (2000) we will be developing a project that considers how we may best deliver services that are designed specifically for men and particularly for fathers. It is expected this project will increase opportunity and enhancement for appropriate programmes for men.

In the meantime we are keen to respond to requests for group programmes. These could be designed and facilitated by Relationship Services, or developed specially for existing men's groups.

CONCLUSION

The paper is an explanation of one agency and its activities in relation to fathers and counselling, and a reflection on some of the issues that concern a number of fathers and men in their relationships. It does not draw on research or information from other sources; it is quite simply a position paper describing the approach to our services of which we are unashamedly proud.