



THE  
**LAY COUNSELOR**  
ACADEMY

# Our Own Personal Growth

When experienced counselors look back at their careers, most of us find that we are increasingly effective and skilled, year after year. There are three primary reasons for this. One is professional: intentional practice and continual learning; the second is personal: tending to our own continual healing and growth; and the third is our ongoing thoughtfulness about how these two areas influence one another.

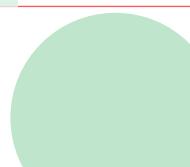
It is impossible to overestimate the influence our own personal growth has on our abilities and skills as a counselor. The reasons for this are unique to our field: 1) our helping modality is the relationship with our client, and all personal growth influences all of our relationships, and 2) our job is to help clients with this very thing: personal growth. The more we are intentionally doing this work, personally, the more effective we will be as counselors. In fact, many of us feel lucky to be in the field for this reason—our personal growth helps us personally *and* professionally.

When we intentionally engage in self-reflection, deepen our self-insight, make supportive changes in our lives, heal difficulties from our past, we come out the other side with new understandings, different perceptions, more peace, and deeper empathy. We are changed and because our work is relational, this change influences our counseling. Additionally, an increased awareness of our own “stuff”—our reactions and feelings - increases our ability to manage these in session, which strengthens our capacity to maintain a nonjudgmental sphere of unconditional positive regard with clients.

While much of the positive influence our personal growth has on our abilities as counselors is subtle, indirect, and diffuse, below are some examples of how personal growth can directly impact our effectiveness as counselors.



Counselor's Intentional Personal Growth	Effect on Abilities as a Counselor
Intentionally working to identify and change our own biases (racial, ethnic, heteronormative, or other biases)	Deeper empathy, curiosity, and humility with clients outside our racial, ethnic, or other affinity group
Working through fear, guilt, and underserved loyalty, to leave unhealthy or toxic relationships (workplaces or people)	More understanding and empathy for what keeps clients in unhealthy relationships; deeper insight into how long it often takes to leave relationships
Engaging in forgiveness work, toward parents or other caregivers, for harm during our childhoods	See clients who are flawed parents with more understanding and kindness; more skill and facility in helping clients forgive their own parents <i>(if indicated- forgiveness is not mandatory for healing)</i>
Working on acceptance of our bodies, just as they are; purposefully attending and healing our relationship with food, weight, and movement	Gives us perspective and a different way of responding to body shame/ diet culture with clients; helps us help clients heal their relationship with food, weight, and movement
Practicing anti-perfectionism	Increases the chances we will notice when clients have this construct; helps us "see" striving for perfection clearly as a harmful
Identifying and healing shame we have about ourselves	Keeps us from judging or shaming clients when they share experiences that touch on these unhealed parts of ourselves
Intentional work toward self-compassion; engaging in self-compassion practices	Gives us high tolerance for clients' anger, disappointment, or judgment toward us; Clients perceive us as safe, trustworthy people to clients. Allows us to recognize when clients struggle with self-compassion. Adds self-compassion as a tool with which to help clients



Obtaining help for depression, anxiety, or other mental health difficulties

Increased empathy for how hard it is to make decisions about taking medications, engage in counseling, and other self-management activities

Joining a 12-step or other self-help or community support group, to assist us in making changes in our own lives

Deeper understanding of the breadth and depth of community support groups available for clients. Empathy for client's fears or hesitations about joining a group

Another aspect of the win/win of personal growth is clients' impact on us. As helpers, we get enormous benefit from the work clients do with us. We are inspired, strengthened, and often heartened by clients' changes and insights. We might feel more courageous to leave a relationship when we see our clients' courage in doing so; we may be inspired by a client's efforts toward becoming a better parent and double-down on our own work with this. We might be surprised, sparked, or delighted by a client's creativity, perhaps igniting our own dormant creative spirit. Or we may be so amazed at our client's growth in assertive communication that we absorb some of it ourselves. In this way, we are in a helping/healing loop: our personal growth work helps clients, and we also benefit from clients' personal growth work!



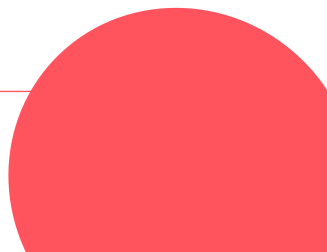
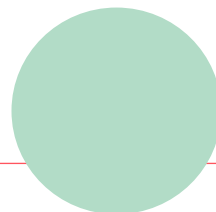
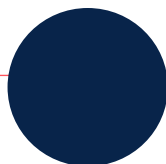
## Two important cautions on this subject:

1. **This article is not an encouragement to share aspects of our own personal challenges and how we've addressed them.** We err on the side of *not* self-disclosing and share minimally after we've intentionally considered whether or not to do so (see Boundaries Article). We talk with our clinical supervisors and support people, about any self-disclosures.

*We do not have to share anything about our personal growth work, for it to benefit clients.*

*Clients' benefit from our continual growth, change, evolutions, and healing because we become increasingly empathic, insightful, present, and wise.*

2. **Often in our personal journeys, we develop strong feelings about what helped us.** We might feel like Al Anon saved our life, that divorcing was the best thing we ever did, that antidepressants gave us a whole new outlook on life, or that moving away from family gave us a newfound sense of freedom. It is normal, common, and helpful for us to share this with family and friends, it is part of solidifying our growth, our success, our change. We tell others our story, so we can hear it ourselves—it is as if we are reminding ourselves what has been so helpful to us. During these times, we often feel “everyone” should try what we did, or that it is the “best” solution. *It is important to be restrained about this in our counseling work.* Caution is called for; we don't evangelize with clients about what helped us or assume what worked for us will work for them. Even if prayer helped us tremendously, journaling gave us a newfound understanding and anxiety management tool, exercise and food changes dramatically helped our depression, setting limits with our family members changed our whole relationship with them, it doesn't mean this will be true for our clients. It is during these times in our own lives, we need to double down on our commitment to listening deeply to clients, following their leads, strengths, preferences, and wisdom. We can remind ourselves gently:



"I don't know what is best for this client"

"My job is to help uncover and elevate clients' own wisdom"

"This client has their own path to healing"

"Stay out of the client's way, in their own path to change and healing"



By reminding ourselves in this way, we stay open, inquisitive, and curious about what the client's deepest wisdom is, for themselves.

