

SILENCE

Sometimes the best way to confront sin is to remain silent and let clients work out their feelings of guilt and questions of blame on their own. This approach may be especially helpful for those who seem overly dependent on the counselor's opinion.

Client: She thinks she owns me. I am thirty-five now, and I need her to be my friend more than my mother. It's really not her business whom I date and whether I choose to sleep with him. It's my business. I will sleep with Tom whenever and wherever I feel like it.

Counselor: (Silence)

Client: I'm not a bad person. I think that's what she wants. She wants me to feel bad, as I did when I was a teenager.

Counselor: (Silence)

Client: Do you know what I mean? I just am tired of feeling like a bad person.

Notice here how the client is looking for approval from the counselor. Sometimes even an affirming head nod or verbal acknowledgment ("I see, uh-huh") is enough to feel approved from a counselor. If the counselor had acknowledged the client's first statement, the client might leave the session feeling that her counselor agrees that she has the right to sleep with Tom anytime and anyplace she chooses. Silence is a relatively gentle form of confrontation that prevents counselors from inadvertently permitting or encouraging sinful behaviors.

PONDERING

Pondering aloud is sometimes a helpful way to confront clients indirectly and cause them to think more intently about their choices. This has sometimes been called the "Columbo technique," named after the television detective who mastered this strategy.

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Counselor: Help me out here a minute. You are saying that you don't really think you need to behave according to your mom's wishes. But there is tension on your face and in your voice, as if you don't really believe what you are saying.

Client: I do believe it. It's just that she seems so powerful. I've been living on my own for eighteen years, but it's as if she's still here, still controlling me.

Counselor: So it's almost as if her voice is inside you.

Client: Yeah, that's exactly what it's like.

Here the counselor is easing the client toward a more complete understanding of conscience. The client wants to blame her mom but actually has internalized many of her mother's values. Perhaps she feels bad about sleeping with Tom, and the counselor is helping her uncover and explore her feelings. As with silence, this is a relatively gentle form of confrontation.

QUESTIONING

By asking specific questions, counselors are sometimes able to access clients' values of right and wrong. This approach can help give clients a feeling of ownership over their decisions rather than simply conforming to meet the expectations of a confrontive counselor.

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Counselor: What are your values about sleeping with Tom?

Client: Well, I don't think it's the best thing to do, but it's not like the worst crime I could do either. My mom seems to think I'll go to hell if I sleep with someone.

Counselor: It sounds as if her religious views are important to her. And it sounds as if yours are different from hers. What about your religious values? How do they affect your choices with Tom?

Though this is more confrontive than either of the first two examples, it respects the client's right to articulate her own values of right and wrong.

DIRECT CENSURE

This technique should be considered only when there is a high level of trust established in the therapeutic relationship. Under

ideal circumstances, it can lead to quick changes. Unfortunately, if it is misused it can also cause severe damage to a therapeutic relationship and reduce the authenticity of future sessions.

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Counselor: Your mother may not express herself well in many situations, but it's interesting that the Bible presents values that are very similar to hers.

Client: What do you mean?

Counselor: God's Word instructs us that sex is only for marriage, and you and Tom aren't married. Hebrews 13:4 reads: "Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers." Perhaps that is what your mom is concerned about, too.

Clearly, this is the most extreme form of confrontation, elevating the counselor's values to a position above the client's values. There are times when direct confrontation is appropriate, but in my opinion it should be used very sparingly. In my years of clinical work, I have used direct censure very rarely.

NOT CONFRONTING

Sometimes confronting sin is not the best therapeutic strategy. In this example, the counselor chooses to move the session in a different direction.

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Counselor: You're feeling angry. I'd like to hear more about it.

Client: She's always calling, always wanting to know everything about my life. And I feel I'm a grown-up now. I can make my own choices.

Counselor: It sounds as if you are feeling a need for a better boundary between you and your mom.

Client: I guess so. I'm just not sure how to tell her that.

In this example, the counselor may have determined that other important therapeutic work must be done before considering the sinfulness of the client's behavior, such as discussing ways of asserting better communication boundaries between the client and her mother.

These examples illustrate five legitimate alternatives when discussing sinful behavior in counseling. Choosing which approach to use in a specific counseling situation requires discernment, wisdom, an understanding of the counseling relationship, and self-awareness. As in previous chapters, the following three questions should be used in coming to careful decisions about confronting sin.

Will This Help Establish a Healthy Sense of Self?

The Christian life is not a matter of fine-tuning our previous self to reduce our propensity to sin. Rather, Christ calls us to exchange our old self for a new self. We are to be transformed, radically changed, born again. The apostle Paul put it this way: "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:4-6).

A Christian view of self calls us to give up one life for another.²³ In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis describes our normal tendency to

In the midst of life's hurried and frantic pace, we easily resort to behavioral-management strategies, assuming we can change from the outside in. But in times of quiet, moments of calm, as we set aside life's hurried pace and renew ourselves in God's presence, we recognize that God wants to change us, and our clients, from the inside out. God wants surrender, not sin-management tactics.²⁵

Here are two more examples. Consider which has the greatest likelihood of eventually leading to inner transformation and surrender.

OUTSIDE-IN APPROACH

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Client: So you think she's right. I guess I do too, but it's just so hard not to feel like a kid again when she is constantly telling me that I'm doing the wrong thing.

Counselor: Is it any easier to think about God telling you what is right and wrong?

Client: I guess so. I mean, that has always been important to me. But when Mom tells me not to do something, it makes me want to do it all the more.

Counselor: How about when God tells you?

Client: It's easier. I know God wants the best for me. And sometimes I think Mom just wants me to look good so she looks good. Yeah, I think I need to make some changes.

Counselor: Let's spend some time talking about how you might make those changes. . . .

At times, direct censure is an appropriate approach to sin. But most of the time, in my opinion, it is more appropriate simply to model the fruit of a transformed life with the ultimate goal of helping people find their deep inner cry for intimacy with God and others.

INSIDE-OUT APPROACH

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Counselor: (Silence)

Client: Do you know what I mean? I just am tired of feeling as if I'm a bad person.

Counselor: I'm wondering if that is a familiar feeling for you.

Client: I've always felt bad. Nothing I do is good enough. Even now, I feel as if you aren't saying anything. As if you think I'm a bad person.

Counselor: That's an important feeling for us to explore.

Client: Well, do you? Do you think I'm bad?

Counselor: Tell me what you think.

Client: (pause, followed by tears) I feel bad. I feel bad all the time.