

Active or Passive Counseling?

Broadly speaking, counseling can be divided into two camps; passive and active.

It is important in all approaches to counseling for the client and counselor to get along and in particular, for the client to feel that the counselor may be helpful in mitigating distress. However, in passive approaches to counseling, it is the relationship that is paramount to the outcome.

In passive approaches to counseling, the counselor provides a safe and inviting environment wherein the client can explore feelings, behaviour and attitudes. The more passive the process, the less likely the counselor will add much to the exploration or content, save from reflecting back points of interest to the client or asking the client to go to greater depth on a particular theme. The theory is that as the client gains comfort in the self-exploration and feels safe in terms of the therapeutic relationship with the counselor, the more that will be naturally disclosed, particularly untoward memories or circumstances that are at the root of the client's distress. As these distressing recollections or circumstances are then disclosed, the client gains opportunity to reflect upon them more openly and thus gain insight and control of these matters affecting his or her life. Passive approaches to counseling generally take months to years to be helpful and is well suited to persons who may have been traumatized by life events where bringing those events to the foreground is intimidating. It is also well suited to persons who tend to balk at the input of others, seemingly well defended against the direct opinions of others. Passive approaches to counseling are also well suited to persons seeking longer-term emotional support as they cope with and manage on-going life problems.

While it is helpful for the client and counselor to get along, with active approaches to counseling, it is not a fundamental requirement per se. In active approaches to counseling it is the belief by the client that the counselor holds specialized knowledge and skills and can thus direct the client to relief of distress that is paramount.

In active approaches to counseling, the client seeks a counselor to advise and direct, or provide guidance to mitigate the presenting problem. The more active the counseling, the more likely the counselor will control the process, asking questions, directly addressing issues of concern and probing for matters the client may not voluntarily disclose. The theory here is that the counselor, by directly probing for and exposing issues of concern,

can more readily address the issues with direct guidance. Further, there is likely a belief held by the counselor, that no matter how comfortable a client feels in the counseling context the client still will not easily or readily disclose distressful recollections or circumstances. Hence it is better to ask questions forthrightly then develop a long-term therapeutic relationship conducive to disclosure and wait. Active approaches to counseling generally takes weeks to a few months to be helpful and is well suited to persons seeking more immediate solutions and who are open to direct feedback and guidance. Length of counseling may be longer if the client is reluctant to follow the directives or guidance of the counselor or only partially heeds the direction of the counselor. Active approaches to counseling is also better suited to persons who are not looking for longer-term emotional support, but who are seeking to change current conditions of distress.

Historically, passive approaches to counseling developed out of psychoanalytic traditions where the client would explore formative experiences and come to realize how those experiences shaped their lives. Upon such recognition, the clients are then presumably able to recognize and develop their own solutions to problems.

Active approaches to counseling, developed from cognitive and behavioural schools of psychology where the psychologist would track behaviour and thoughts to then interrupt the dysfunctional behaviour or thoughts and replace with more functional behaviour or thoughts. From a social work perspective, active approaches also developed from an intent to alter social situations or structures thought to give rise to problems of relationships, thus distressing the individual.

Passive or active? Depends on whether the client is seeking emotional support and a deeper understanding of the root of their distress, or to directly and quickly relieve distress that is undermining one's well-being and social functioning.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counseling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.