

# Professional proximity in counseling practice\*

## The need for secure bases for self-care

Jakob van Wielink, Marnix Reijmerink and Leo Wilhelm

*Christine felt a wave of pain and sadness go through her when her client Marcus told her that he had not been able to say goodbye to his sister Bibi. It had all happened so quickly. Bibi had been in such bad shape after her car accident that he could not be with her in time.*

*Marcus tearfully told how hard it was for him that he had not been able to tell her what had remained unsaid between him and her. That he loved her, of course. But most of all how he regretted that he had said he had never believed in the marriage between her and her partner Eric. He knew that he had hurt her with that, and he had also realized by now that he had been wrong. But he had never had the courage to come back to it. And now it was too late.*

*Christine was moved after her session with Marcus. His pain touched the story that was playing out between her and her oldest sister. She felt Marcus's experience not only touching her, but also prompting her to have a conversation with her sister. The only way, beyond the shame she felt, to prevent it from ever being too late.*

Your client's story may touch you at unexpected moments – we call them triggers – and thus touch your wounds. Not so simple to deal with. Every trigger is an invitation to observe yourself, to take care of your own wounds and bring them to healing. In this way, you prevent old wounds and their associated emotions from holding you hostage as you counsel your clients. Your self-care as a counselor is not only a care that focuses on your own well-being, it is at the same time an invest-

ment in yourself as a professional to be able to better counsel your clients.

### Creating professional proximity through self-care

Your client's story repeatedly confronts you with a fundamental decision: Seek proximity or maintain distance? With proximity we mean not only physical, but also emotional closeness and nearness. What serves your client best? Which approach allows your client to face (the pain of) his or her own loss in safety and to make new discoveries during this search? Distance or proximity?

A counseling relationship requires a safe space into which the client can emerge with his or her story. The formation of this relationship is therefore about professional proximity. The need for proximity and thus for safety lies at the very base of one's attachment. Attachment that we necessarily and unconsciously form as children in order to survive. An attachment that we then take into our adult lives as a blueprint for our relationships with others. From a predominantly secure attachment, when our attachment figures have been sufficiently available, we can more easily bond, seek proximity, and experience safety. However, when our attachment figures have been insufficiently reliable available, emotionally or physically, we run the risk of forming predominantly insecure attachments. This makes it more difficult to bond with others later, to seek proximity and to experience safety. But it is exactly in proximity with others where healing is pos-

\* Nicht veröffentlichte englische Fassung

sible. In proximity, however, we also encounter our own vulnerability, the risk of rejection. Out of our own vulnerability, then, professional distance seems a seemingly safe approach. The idea behind it is that it should still be about the client and not about us. But to really get in touch with the client, the counselor must also get in touch with himself. And that requires basic self-care.

After all, as professionals, we are not a neutral canvas, but bring our own experiences and imprints as people. And how can it really be about the other person if you yourself, for whatever reason, are not fully there?<sup>1</sup>

### The power of the secure base

Here we follow the approach of a secure base. The secure base is a concept from attachment theory.<sup>2</sup> It is »a source that makes you feel welcome and inspires and encourages you to face life's challenges in connection.«<sup>3</sup> These sources can be people. From your childhood, they are ideally your parents as attachment figures, but they can be other people too. Also places, like the place you grew up, or objects that have special symbolic meaning to you can become a secure base for you, as can drastic events and goals you set for yourself.

The theme pair *caring* and *daring* show what secure bases are and do for you: Through caring, they provide you with safety, support, and care; through daring, they challenge you to adventure, experiment, and grow. Secure bases, through the caring they give you, help you enter the world with confidence and form new relationships. And they help you learn to deal with disappointment with your daring. They support you in having experiences on the edge of your comfort zone and learning from them when you are back in your comfort zone. This allows you to put what you have learned back into practice. This movement outward and inward to experience and learn is the same movement as your self-care: self-care is not an end in itself, but a means to continue to grow as a (professional) person. In this way, you

as a counselor can be a secure base for your clients and shape professional proximity. Our own secure bases, in turn, serve to maintain our self-care. They ensure that we ourselves remain sufficiently nourished and inspired to be a resource for the people we live and work with at the same time.

Knowing your own experiences of caring and daring in your (early) life can create a safe environment for you and with your client. In this



safe environment, you can bring your own vulnerability and your willingness to be touched to counseling – like Christine from the case study – because you can bring bonding to the forefront. As a counselor, you are first and foremost a human being encountering another human being. When you empathize with another person and put yourself in their shoes, you enable your client to deal with drastic changes and losses in their lives.<sup>4</sup>

### **Touch and be touched**

The basic attitude for counseling can be one of presence: being present with empty hands and an open heart, without wanting or needing to solve anything. »Being in the room and being present« means that you are not only bonded in the relationship with the client, but you are also guiding the process. You are fully in touch with the client, as well as with yourself – with what is hap-



Photomann7 / Shutterstock

pening within you. And what is happening within you tells you something that is important in your counseling at that moment. You are using yourself as an instrument. Not just as a source of theories and models, but more importantly as a living sounding board with empathy that bonds and attunes to the other person. Research shows again and again that it is the extent to which a genuine emotional connection is made during counseling relationships, that makes guidance effective.

The importance of proximity in the counseling relationship is based on the client's need for attunement. Attunement is necessary to achieve a sense of safety that allows the client to become inwardly calm and open to new experiences. When these new experiences are welcomed, learning occurs. And when your client is able to learn, a doorway to a new future opens for him.

Professional proximity is then about your willingness and ability to be present in such a way that – from having your own secure bases, which you hopefully do have – you can also be a secure base in the counseling relationship with your client. Therefore, it is not only important to have a clear map of your own secure bases and to actually use them in the best possible way, but also to encourage the client to map their secure bases and to ask themselves whether they are sufficiently supported and challenged by these sources.

Encountering ourselves and others in close proximity, powerful healing emerges that help to give meaning to what threatened to throw us off track. Counseling and guiding people is based on the willingness and ability to come close, to be close and to stay close. Especially when the situation is tense, painful or frightening. Showing your client that you are willing to really be there for them means the difference between mere survival – because the client feels they are ultimately alone anyway – and living fully, because the client sees: In the darkest moment of my life, I was not alone. It is hope that dies last.

#### References

- 1 Wielink, J. van, Wilhelm, L. and Van Geelen–Merks, D. (2019). *Loss, Grief, and Attachment in Life Transitions. A Clinician's Guide to Secure Base Counseling*. Series in Death, Dying, and Bereavement. New York: Routledge.
- 2 Bowlby, J. (1988). *A Secure Base. Parent–child attachment and healthy human development*. Londen: Routledge.
- 3 Wielink, J. van, Fiddelaers–Jaspers, R. and Wilhelm, L. (2023). *The Language of Transition in Leadership. Your Calling as a Leader in a World of Change*. New York: Routledge.
- 4 Perry, B.D. and Winfrey, O. (2021). *What happened to you? Conversations on trauma, resilience, and healing*. New York: Melcher Media.



**Jakob van Wielink** (1974) is a partner at The School for Transition in Huissen, the Netherlands, and a faculty mentor at the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition. He is a member of the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement.

[www.deschoolvoortransitie.nl](http://www.deschoolvoortransitie.nl)

Contact: [jakob@deschoolvoortransitie.nl](mailto:jakob@deschoolvoortransitie.nl)



**Marnix Reijmerink** (1978) is a partner at The School for Transition in Huissen (Netherlands). He coaches teams, organizations and their leaders at home and abroad in their leadership development.

[www.deschoolvoortransitie.nl](http://www.deschoolvoortransitie.nl)

Contact: [marnix@deschoolvoortransitie.nl](mailto:marnix@deschoolvoortransitie.nl)



**Leo Wilhelm** (1966) is a consultant at The School for Transition in Huissen, the Netherlands. He is a grief counselor, author and coach and works as a manager at the central government.

[www.deschoolvoortransitie.nl](http://www.deschoolvoortransitie.nl)

Contact: [leo@deschoolvoortransitie.nl](mailto:leo@deschoolvoortransitie.nl)