



A counselor's heart: Listening with curiosity

Amy Rosechandler is a licensed mental health counselor and certified group psychotherapist who works with teenagers and adults at the Rochester Institute of Technology's (RIT's) Counseling and Psychological Services and in her own private practice, Clarity Mental Health Counseling. She graduated from the University of Rochester in New York with a master's in community mental health counseling. She has also held positions at Strong Hospital and Unity Hospital in Rochester. Her primary interests include narrative therapy, social justice, feminist theory and solution-focused work.



Amy Rosechandler

Danielle Irving: What influenced you to become a professional counselor?

Amy Rosechandler: I grew up in a tough situation. My family was up against a lot of problems, but we had strengths too. There were some adults in my community who played important roles at just the right times and helped ensure my safety, but also saw the best in me, believed in me and gave me access to resources.

I always felt like I wanted to be that "someone" for somebody else. I naturally became curious about poverty, class, gender, marginalization and the role of young people in the community. This was the foundation for my interest in psychology. My guidance counselor in high school said, "Well, you already have a lot of experience with this, so you'll have an advantage."

One of the first classes I signed up for in college was called something like American Radical Thought. I was hooked

on social justice from there. I decided I wanted to spend my time talking to individuals about how to change the world from the inside out.

DI: Tell us about your current role as a mental health therapist at RIT's Counseling and Psychological Services.

AR: I currently serve as a mental health therapist and groups coordinator at RIT. I provide individual and group therapy to both undergraduate and graduate students. I also supervise new counselors as part of our training program.

I love working with students because it is such a time of learning and growth. As I mentioned earlier, college was a turning point for me in new thinking and opportunity. It felt like finally I was in charge of my own life. I think a lot of college students, no matter what background, begin to feel that way.

College is a great time to come to counseling and investigate yourself, your values and your worldview. College also presents a lot of challenges. Students engage with developmental turning points about independence, sexuality, relationships, motivation, success and self-esteem. Many students also get time away to reflect on family dynamics and start to think, "Wait a minute ... That wasn't healthy!" It's a critical time toward understanding the self, family and community.

DI: What is necessary for someone to be successful working in this type of setting?

AR: Stepping foot on any college campus, it becomes immediately apparent that you are entering a unique

community and culture. We can serve students better if we get involved in outreach [and] collaboration and even just walk around so we know what's going on. College mental health providers are working in a unique system, and every problem you see should be placed in context.

It's also important to have a good understanding of human development and the development of psychopathology to understand how mental health concerns emerge with young people. Some students will be experiencing a first major depressive disorder or panic attack in college and getting treatment for the first time. It can be a critical time for psychoeducation.

It helps to be a jack-of-all-trades. We meet with students who face a wide range of stressors and experiences. We need to know something about how to help with concerns as wide-ranging as eating disorders, transgender care and challenges related to being on the autism spectrum.

DI: What counseling theory or approach do you follow most closely?

AR: I love narrative therapy and other constructivist theories. I like creating meaning with clients in sessions. The heart of my skill as a therapist is listening with curiosity. Narrative techniques have allowed me to take full advantage of my curiosity and creativity. Narrative techniques help to listen closely for exceptions to problems, ways to separate the person from the problem, alternative understandings and [then] try to deconstruct the forces behind problems.

Group work is also very powerful to me. Group sessions allow for clients to learn and practice new skills, be validated by peers and support one another's goals.

DI: How would you deal with an unmotivated student or client?

AR: It's nice to remember that clients who are stuck want change. They are coming to your office amidst everything else they have going on in life. That's amazing to me. So they must be motivated in some way.

Many students struggle with motivation because they feel burned out, uninspired or disempowered. We can talk about the context and factors that are contributing to problems with motivation and even get angry with that. Getting angry usually helps when we feel stuck.

DI: What is the most creative and innovative counseling technique you have used?

AR: One of the most magical interventions I keep coming back to is letter writing and other forms of collaborative documentation with clients. This is informed by narrative therapy practices.

You know how a letter can make things really feel official? I like to write a letter to clients after a session to summarize important points and ask further questions. Clients also assist me

in writing letters to future clients who might want to learn about skills to handle certain situations. For example, one letter I use often is a letter from a client and myself highlighting some of the ways he was able to get through a breakup by "focusing on himself again." We don't use clients' identifying information or particulars about the situation, but we do hold up the client's unique knowledge and skills so they can be seen more clearly. This really becomes more meaningful for everyone involved.

DI: You've recently established your own private practice, Clarity Mental Health Counseling. What's the greatest challenge you have faced during the process thus far?

AR: Marketing is one of the initial challenges that has become really fun for me. I didn't know what to expect at first about how clients would become connected to my practice. Part of me expected things would go like my agency jobs — just get yourself a space and people will come. But finding a great fit for a counselor is no easy feat.

Spreading your message and identity as a therapist is important so that people can find you. I had to learn very quickly about how to share my message online in a warm, welcoming and beautiful way. This is something I knew little about before. Now I have fun and enjoy being creative with ways to reach more people online. I love how I can help people learn more about mental health through Facebook, my blog posts, LinkedIn or even Instagram.

DI: What do you know now about being in private practice that you didn't know when you got started?

AR: I didn't realize how personally fulfilling it would be. From the very start and all the way through to the end of a helping relationship, it's just you and the client. Without the structure of an agency or center, I felt more validated about my skills and identity as a counselor. I still come home at night thinking, "Wow! I am making a difference in people's lives. I built this."

DI: What steps should someone consider when beginning the process of starting a new private practice?

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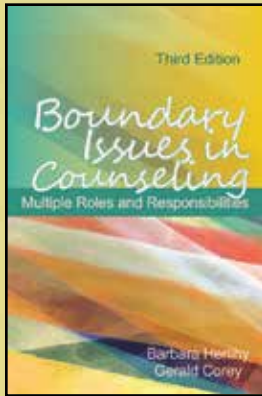
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AR: I can think of two steps that are important at the very beginning. If I could go back and start over, I would have started marketing myself at the very start of my career. I think that’s a great first step. Even if you don’t have a private practice yet, make time to create a name for yourself [and] establish your professional self in the community. Volunteer, write and be active on social media to promote information about mental health and your areas of interest.

The next step is education. Research your community to find out areas that need more services. Research what other professionals are offering. The American Counseling Association offers so much in terms of education to support understanding of ethics, marketing and practical tools for private practice.

DI: ACA has more than 55,000 members. Have I left anything out that you want our readers to know about you or your work?

AR: Thank you for capturing my journey as a counselor and giving me this opportunity to reflect about my work. It’s important to acknowledge that we never come to this work alone or by accident. We can understand our work better when we keep in mind our own stories and the stories of the people who shaped us.

My relentless hope, curiosity and energy help make me the counselor I am. Each of us brings something different to the table. We need a diverse, aware and passionate fleet of counselors to be accessible to the communities that need us. ♦

Danielle Irving is the senior coordinator for ACA’s professional projects and career services department. Contact her at dirving@counseling.org.

Letters to the editor:
ct@counseling.org