

## **Through the Lens #9**

### **The Ten Percent Solution**

**Roberta M Gilbert, M.D.**

In questioning many colleagues over the years, I have learned that it is the belief of most of the therapists who use Bowen family systems theory as their frame of reference, that *only about 10 per cent of people who contact them for help or training continue to stay involved with the ideas over the long term.*

This answer to my frequent question used to bother me a great deal. It gave rise to several other questions. They follow, below.

**To begin, what are the factors that might go into such an observation? Let us look at a few:**

#### **Where people are in life.**

AA has famously found that people addicted to substances often must “hit bottom” before they are ready to commit to the work necessary to free themselves of addiction. That is, they must be at the end of their ropes. At the bottom, there is only one way to look and that is up. From the bottom, one is desperate for answers, ready to hear, ready to make changes, even painful ones, if necessary.

Therapists, too, often note that a certain amount of anxiety is necessary in order for people to seek help in the first place. Without that minimum anxiety level, one will not see the necessity for going to all the bother and expense of self-examination or family therapy. Freudian psychoanalysts often said that a certain level of anxiety is a necessary component for the initiation of psychotherapy.

With a fairly painful amount of anxiety, people, if they don't freeze into inaction, will start to take steps. They will often speak to a clergy person first about what they see as the problem, and often, spiritual counseling may be what is needed. Clergy people become quite adept at knowing when a referral for emotional dilemmas is needed. Further assistance is often offered and accepted.

However, when they get to the counselor/coach/therapist, they may or may not stay with the work of self change long enough to get permanent value from it. Those are the people who, after the first initial lowering of the anxiety, or the loss of a symptom of someone in the nuclear family, will disappear from the office of the helping professional.

If the anxiety has been intense enough, even when it lessens, the memory of the pain is enough to keep someone motivated enough to want to continue to lose old patterns of behavior, making new ones. Also the more gratifying experience of life at a higher level of functioning may motivate people to continue on.

What other factors may contribute to people dropping out once a good effort has begun?

## **Do people see the importance of thinking about relationships and relationship systems?**

Some people find it very hard to think in abstractions at all. They may find the world of emotions, anxiety and relationship patterns or relationship stress a little too nebulous for continued effort. This kind of work—on sorting out the details of how it is that human relationships can become so painful and twisted, when they started out to be so beautiful—may seem to these people to be a little silly, or somehow unimportant.

Yet, though they have experienced enough pain to come for help or training, they find it even more painful to have to sit and think differently. It will strike them as nonsensical, or a waste of time, this whole area of human relationship systems and what makes them tick. Or not.

Some of these people can follow a coach for a distance, but when asked to think in new and sometimes counterintuitive ways, they don't seem willing to go that far. For example, if the coach goes along with their assessment of the situation—someone else is making them miserable—they are fine. If, however, the coach suggests that each person may actually be contributing to the presenting problem, and further, that it only takes one to make things go better in the relationship, this person can become reactive.

This reactivity can be uncomfortable enough to suggest that the only solution is to leave their work, refusing to take a look at how they might be involved in the presenting dilemma.

## **Is there a commitment to former education or other theories?**

I have seen marriages where one is trying very hard to work on self according to the guiding principles/concepts of Bowen family systems theory, but the other is committed intellectually to one or another, more traditional theory. When two intimates are not on the same page in how they think about relationships, there can be a constant pull and tug, with one stuck in a way of thinking that makes it difficult to come along as the other steps up in functioning. This often turns out to be a blaming type of drag that can be a source of frustration to each.

It can also mean that someone who appears for help in the therapist's or coach's office may not be able to hear the questions being asked or the different way of thinking. Someone who has devoted a whole lifetime to perhaps teaching or writing in a certain vein, one based on individual-based old theory, will not easily see the need for re-thinking from a different frame of reference.

Some people may think that their theology conflicts with a natural systems view of the human, that suggests that we humans are more emotionally like other species, than different from them.

Often, professors or practitioners are so committed to "eclecticism" that they cannot see a systems way of looking. They think they can take a little from this school of thought and a little from that, depending on what is needed in a specific situation, missing the fact that systems thinking stands alone and conflicts with other, more individual-based ways of seeing. It is sufficient for any human dilemma that is brought to it. In fact, it clashes with the basic axioms of other theories in a way that makes it impossible to combine them in any coherent or logical way. These people have closed their minds to any new knowledge and will also leave their work prematurely.

## **What about the "change back" phenomenon?**

When people make efforts towards more differentiation of self, the system, or someone in it often, if not always, reacts. This is often referred to as the “change back” phenomenon. If the differentiating one knows about this in advance, one can usually stay on course, in contact and the reaction is usually short-lived.

Sometimes people either do not know about the change back, or forget about it under the stress of the moment. In that case, they can react back. Now the differentiating comes to a close. At this point people can become discouraged, especially if they are not in coaching with an experienced consultant. They can conclude that Bowen family systems theory really doesn't work and give up on further efforts to work on self.

All of this adds up to some of the many reasons people have for not seeing, for not continuing in good work that they start.

In addition, some other questions and observations occur:

### **Does the “Ten Percent” phenomenon have more to do with the client/learner or the professional/consultant/teacher?**

Either party in my experience, can throw the work off track. The client/learner can, for all the reasons listed, as well as many others, quit working on differentiation of self.

The professional/consultant can slide unwittingly into a number of errors:

He or she can, usually because of a functional position of his or her own, take sides with one or the other person in a family. This can happen even if only one is in the room. This functional position, probably has a lot to do with what Freud referred to as “countertransference,” when a professional helper develops strong feelings for or against a client.

Whenever it occurs, countertransference can interfere with the work of the client, who will perceive it for what it is, anxiety, and usually, take it on. Anxious people are not easy to be around and anxiety is infectious. People instinctively flee anxious people. And so they distance themselves.

This would be only a couple of many transgressions the professional can get into. But they are probably the most common.

### **Is ten percent worth all the effort?**

In answer to this question, several points come to mind.

First, even when people don't continue to stay formally involved with the ideas, or when there are long gaps in their involvement, they may continue to use some of what they have learned. I used to tell Dr. Bowen that while a little knowledge may be dangerous, even a little knowledge of Bowen theory is better than none at all. Any of the eight concepts can be useful in one's life. We really have no way of knowing how many people who have no contact with us are still using some idea they learned in coaching or in reading, or at a lecture.

In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell gives many examples of how ideas grow in a population. Important ideas and innovations always start out affecting only small numbers of people. But over time, because of the phenomenon of doubling, where one person tells another, the importance of the new thought or method grows until it finally becomes a part of the culture.

If you would like to contribute questions or comments to this column for Dr. Gilbert to address, please write her at: [rgoffice136@gmail.com](mailto:rgoffice136@gmail.com).