



The Four Rules of Therapeutic Pacing

One of the big challenges that novice therapists find themselves facing is how to 'therapeutically pace' the session. Below are four rules that can help develop your therapeutic 'pace'. Well, really, they're more guidelines than rules as there may be times when it is in the best service of the client to do something a bit differently – after all, part of being a professional is having the ability to make thoughtful, informed decisions on what approach is right for each client.

1. Silence is your friend. Perhaps the most underrated of skills, silence can help the client to start to sift through the issues they are facing, and to gain clarity before speaking about these. Silence is directly linked to the counsellor having UPR for the client, and it allows the client to set the pace of the session, and to trust they will find their own way without needing the counsellor to lead them.
2. Use questions only to clarify your understanding. If you find yourself being curious when asking questions, ask yourself: 'Who is this question for – me or the client?' In general, **questions should be used only minimally in counselling**, and **their use varies greatly between the therapeutic relationship** and other relationships (e.g. in social situations with friends).
3. Be patient. Clients can sometimes take time to share what is going on for them. Part of therapeutic pace is building trust. This is all part of developing the therapeutic relationship, and is reflected in the skills that you will use at the early stages of this. For example, rapport-building, attending, reflection and paraphrasing are all important early-stage skills – whereas using immediacy and challenging too early would risk creating a rupture before the relationship had even fully begun.

4. Work at the client's pace. Think of counselling as walking a path with the client. It's the client who leads no matter how slowly they walk. Your job is to walk with them, not to go ahead and pull them along! It can be particularly tempting to try to pull the client along when you are working with a limited number of sessions, but it is never in their best service to do so. At worst, it could even be dangerous, removing their defences before they are steady enough to manage without.

In his book, *To Lead an Honorable Life* (PCCS Books, 2003: 1), Shlien spoke of visiting a poppy field to watch the flowers open in the sun, observing that he could force the petals open in an effort to speed up the process, but that doing so inevitably damaged the beautiful flower within.

In other words, people must be allowed to open safely in their own good time.