

Affecting How People See Themselves Through Love

Corrective relational experiences (CRE) are “affective experiences that are new and unexpected for the client that contradict the familiar, expected experiences of his/her past.” (Cha, 2019¹). As a result, transformation occurs in how the client views themselves, others, and God.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve made sense of who they were through God’s love and instruction. The Fall broke that perfect relationship between God and man as well as between fellow human beings. Now, cut off from our primary source of our identity, we’re not only born with innate shame, but we form too much of our identity from how others see us. We struggle with a negative sense of self, which is often exacerbated by how people have responded to us in the past. God wants us to see ourselves as he sees us, and as caregivers, we can help model the Gospel by reflecting God’s love to the people we serve. Since it is our past hurtful experiences that deepen our innate shame and shape our negative self-image, experiencing something different and positive is essential for transformation.

To illustrate, here is my experience of a corrective experience. Growing up with a generous dose of corrections, unsolicited advice, and brutal honesty, I internalized that I was not particularly liked. Instead, my experiences told me I was liked only when I performed well. However, my perception of myself altered when I had an unexpected and different experience with a supervisor. While catching up and laughing together, in a moment of clarity, I noticed her delight, deeply enjoying my company. Even though there was no verbal communication of her affection, I intuitively knew she genuinely liked me. What I heard from that experience was, “I *am* likable the way I am.” Only then, could I imagine God and others possibly liking me just for who I am. The experience was minute but powerful. It helped me start to set healthy boundaries in relationships. Because I knew whether people liked me did not depend on my performance, I was able to confront others and say “no.” It also permitted me to accept myself for who I was with my flaws and limitations. I was able to relax more, and be comfortable and present in groups instead of preoccupied with fear of making mistakes.

When you minister to others, corrective relational experiences need to be personal and specific. To offer meaningful CRE, you have to understand what you are correcting. As you get to know

¹ “What is Counseling?” Dr. Judy Cha, LMFT, 2019

the person, be discerning about what their hurt was and what beliefs rose from that hurt. Here are a few examples of contextualizing the correctional relational experience based on certain hurts and beliefs.

Scenario #1— People who believe they need to perform in order to be accepted

Performance driven people fear making mistakes or doing something wrong because they believe they will be rejected. They probably experienced criticism, judgment and shame from others when they messed up in the past. So, it is especially important how you respond to their mistakes or wrongdoings by giving them grace and acceptance.

- Normalize and help shift their perspective. *It's okay to make mistakes. Part of the human experience is that we are all going to mess up. What you have done does not change who you are.*
- Empathize and validate their feelings. *I'm sorry you're so distressed. It sounds like making mistakes is really hard for you because you worry about others judging you.*
- Respond with grace in your words and non-verbal communication: Do not back away from the relationship, look shocked or disappointed. Be warm and empathic in your demeanor. *I could see why you might have done that. It's not easy, is it?*
- Separate the action vs. person and provide reassurance. *Doing something wrong doesn't mean there is something wrong with you. I see that you could've done that differently but I still love and care for you just as you are.*

Scenario #2 — People who fear conflict and avoid confrontation

People who have negative experiences with conflict tend to avoid confronting because they fear situations getting out of control or hurting others. They may have experienced rejection, anger, retaliation, and blame shifting in the past. When working with such people, you may be tempted to ease their discomfort by avoiding conflict completely, but that's not helpful. Helping people experience a conflict that not only resolves issues but also restores connection without escalation can heal the past hurts and alter the person's view of self.

- Create a safe place with the person's input to foster vulnerability. *I want our time to feel safe so we can be vulnerable and open. What do you need to feel safe with me?*
- Be curious about how they are experiencing you and encourage feedback, especially when you notice the person may be feeling something negative. *I'm wondering what you felt and thought about our current interaction. I'd love to hear what is going on with you.*

- Have them role play or practice confrontation with you. Be honest with kindness. Stay consistent in your affect, which helps them feel safe and see that, even as you practice disagreement, you are not rejecting them or shaming them.

Scenario #3 — People who are used to being enabled

People who grew up being enabled may struggle with boundaries and with taking responsibility for the consequences of their behavior. CRE in these situations would involve loving but firm experiences. Make sure you are consistently connecting with them well so they can experience boundaries and limits in the context of love, not rejection.

- Be curious about the person's behavior and express concern: *I noticed that you were late the last several times and I'm concerned about you. Is everything OK? Is there anything I can do to help you?*
- Share how you are experiencing the person's behavior: *This is probably not what you are trying to express with being late, but what I'm hearing is that our meetings are not important to you. How do you feel about that?*
- Set healthy boundaries. *I value our time together, but I do need to end on time, so we may not get to everything you want to discuss.*
- Allow people to experience the consequences of their actions, while maintaining the relationship. Avoid rescuing. Even though you could not get through everything they wanted, do not over accommodate to reschedule sooner than you would have otherwise. *We can talk again next week and I look forward to our time together then.*

A corrective relational experience is a way for us to incarnate Christ and reflect his wise love. As we offer these experiences to people—not only in the counseling room but in all our relationships, including family, friendships, work and church—we can positively influence how they view themselves and others.