



# The Four Processes of Counseling: Building Alliance

Natasha Steenkamp, LMHC  
Kate Glerup, PhD, LMHC, CAS

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Building Alliance involves fostering a safe and trusting collaborative connection between the caregiver and the person receiving care. This process is not only the foundation of the helping relationship, but also one of the most important instruments in the healing work. Therefore, as caregivers, we must pay close attention to the quality and strength of the relationship throughout our journey with people. This involves meeting the person where they are in their story, considering their unique experiences and needs, and responding with acceptance, empathy, and understanding. It requires open communication and mutual respect.

# The Importance of Building Alliance

## Embodied experience of safety

Whether we are conscious of it or not, our nervous systems are constantly monitoring our physical and social-emotional environment for cues of safety or danger. They respond to these cues automatically. Our nervous systems either open us up to connection or move us away from it. Therefore, it is crucial for caregivers to foster a trusting relational environment where a person's nervous system can have a felt sense of safety, enabling them to feel fully present and connected. An embodied experience of safety and trust helps people explore their inner thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

In this environment, they can more easily:

1. Name and grieve their deepest wounds.
2. Understand and evaluate the meaning they have made of painful experiences and the strategies they used to protect themselves from feeling hurt again.

## Model a kinder, softer way

Most people struggle to respond to their own wounded and broken parts in a compassionate way. When we consistently show up with kindness, empathy, validation, and understanding, then the individual we are serving can learn new ways to respond to themselves with greater compassion and curiosity. This restoration of a kinder relationship with oneself is important in the ongoing process of healing.

## Facilitate felt corrective relational experiences

God created us to make sense of ourselves and our world within the context of healthy relationships. However, since the Fall, we all experience levels of brokenness in our most formative relationships. These painful experiences then shape the stories that we believe in our core to be true about ourselves, others, and God. We want to help create *corrective relational experiences*, which are mismatching experiences that help challenge and rewrite a person's negative beliefs formed through their painful core stories.

## Provide context to help people experience the gospel

When we show the gospel, not just talk about it, we help people taste the grace of God. In Redeemer Counseling's GIFT approach, we focus on *showing* Christ's heart, which Jesus himself describes as humble and gentle (Matthew 11:29). Explicitly sharing about Jesus or the gospel while building an alliance is not required. However, we do seek to model Jesus. We do this from the first moment we meet the person, engaging them in a safe and trusting way, making space for all parts of them, and compassionately responding to their needs. As these positive interactions accumulate, we are helping the other person experience the acceptance and compassion of Christ.

# Tips for Building an Alliance

Think of Building Alliance as if you are an attentive host, focused on creating a warm and welcoming relational environment. When we sincerely welcome the person, all parts of them, we help undo the aloneness that the person may have previously experienced. Be a host who delights in your guests. Here are a few tips on how to foster an atmosphere of attentive hospitality.

## 1) Be a student

Enter a person's story with a humble posture of "not knowing." Practice compassionate curiosity with the intention of deepening your understanding of the person's story and how they make meaning of their experiences. Ask open-ended questions that invite deeper sharing and then listen. The intent in the process of Building Alliance is not to problem solve or analyze, but to convey your genuine interest and your desire to empathically *know* the person.

## 2) Leave no BODY behind

Remembering that a person's nervous system is constantly looking for cues of danger, safety, and connection, check in regularly during your meetings. Try simple questions like, "What is happening inside right now?" "Where do you notice tension in your body?" Notice small changes in body language and gently reflect your observation back to the person. "I noticed that your fists clenched as I asked that question. I wonder what is happening for you now?"

## 3) Respect and maintain healthy boundaries

Establishing appropriate boundaries is essential for building a trusting relationship. It

helps to provide a sense of safety and autonomy.

- Ask permission: "Would it be okay for us to pause here and make space for the feelings of anger that are surfacing?"
- Ask for feedback on what feels safe and respect it. Do not assume you know. What feels safe is different for each person.
- Honor confidentiality.

## 4) Consider each person's unique history and needs

The person's specific relational wounds and needs should guide what you emphasize as you focus on Building Alliance. This also helps to facilitate new experiences that help correct painful experiences. For example:

- For a person whose emotional needs were minimized by a parent while growing up, be intentional about helping the person name specific emotional experiences and validate that it makes sense that they would experience these emotions.
- For an artistic person who was ridiculed at school for being "different," delight in the person's artistic expression and welcome it as a resource/strength in the therapeutic work

## 5) Pay attention to the dynamics between you and the person.

Cultural and power differences are part of any helping relationship and, if left unaddressed, can create obstacles to a strong and trusting connection. Always consider these, often unnamed, interpersonal dynamics that may be present in the caregiving relationship. Be willing to talk about them honestly and humbly, learning to understand what it is like for the other person.

## Building Alliance: Jesus & the Samaritan woman

In the Gospels, we see that Jesus was masterful at making people feel seen, safe, and welcomed. He did so with Zacchaeus (Luke 19) as well as many others who were weak, sick, and rejected. When Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:3-30), we see how He created a safe relational environment for this woman who had experienced brokenness and shame. The alliance he builds stirs in her a deep longing that she herself was not even fully aware of.

Jesus chooses to enter Samaria on his way to Galilee, a path many Jewish people avoided because of socioreligious tensions. This, in itself, was a cross-cultural, corrective experience. He meets the Samaritan woman where she is, at the well in the hot midday, and fosters a sense of physical and social safety by engaging her in a private conversation. He makes Himself vulnerable first by asking her for a drink.

That He would speak to her was such a mismatching experience that she pointed it out. He makes space for her to honestly name the reality of the uncomfortable dynamics between them—power differences (male/female interaction) and cultural dynamics (a Jewish person would never be seen talking to a Samaritan). Jesus also understands and considers her needs (i.e. drawing water) and unique experiences, and engages her without judgment, helping her to name the painful parts of her story. He welcomes the different parts of her—her curiosity and questions, her shame, and ultimately her deeper longing for connection with God.

Jesus conveys an empathic understanding and acceptance of this woman, creating a corrective relational experience for her that leads to her spiritual hope and transformed relationships with others.