

FORMATION-CENTERED COUNSELING

An Introduction to a New Approach in Counseling

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Something has been missing from the counseling room for a long time. Not skill. Not compassion. Not technique. What has been missing is formation.

Most people who walk into a counseling office — whether a clinical practice or a pastor’s study — are not primarily in need of a diagnosis. They are not simply a collection of symptoms to be managed or behaviors to be restructured. They are human beings in the middle of a story, shaped by everything that has happened to them and everything they have chosen, and they are becoming something — whether anyone in that room is paying attention to it or not.

Formation-Centered Counseling is built on the conviction that paying attention to that process of becoming is not peripheral to good counseling. It is the whole point.

What Is Formation-Centered Counseling?

Formation-Centered Counseling (FCC) is an approach to counseling that treats the formation of the whole person — and primarily the spirit — as its central aim, followed by the renewal of cognitions, behaviors, emotions, relationships, and physical health. The resolution of presenting problems is a byproduct of this deeper work rather than the sole focus. It is designed for use by both clinical and pastoral counselors who believe that lasting change reaches deeper than behavior, and that the most important question in any counseling relationship is not “What is wrong?” but “Who is this person becoming?”

FCC is not therapy rebranded with Christian or otherwise spiritual vocabulary. It is a distinct modality with its own philosophical foundation, its own understanding of the human person, and its own vision of what counseling is ultimately for. At the same time, it is not in competition with clinical training or established therapeutic approaches. It is a framework that sits beneath those

approaches, reorienting their goals and expanding their reach into dimensions of human life that symptom-focused models were never designed to address.

“People are not primarily problems to be solved. They are persons being formed. And the goal of counseling is not relief — but transformation.”

— K. Lee Brown

The word “formation” is deliberate. It draws on a rich tradition of theological and philosophical thought — articulated most accessibly in recent decades by thinkers like Dallas Willard — that understands human beings as always in process, always being shaped by the forces, relationships, and choices that surround and inhabit their lives. Formation is not something that happens to some people in some circumstances. It is constant. Every human being is being formed, all the time, into something. The question Formation-Centered Counseling presses is simply: into what?

Who Is It For?

Formation-Centered Counseling is intended for two distinct but overlapping audiences.

Pastoral and Christian Counselors

For those working explicitly within a Christian context — pastors, chaplains, lay counselors, spiritual directors, and faith-based clinicians — FCC provides a coherent theological framework for what many have always sensed the counseling relationship should be doing but have lacked precise language to articulate and practice systematically. It takes seriously the spiritual dimension of human suffering, the role of God as the primary agent of transformation, and the call of Jesus not merely to believe rightly but to become genuinely new.

Many have quietly felt the tension between the ideas they were trained in and the deeper, more practical work they sense is needed for true and lasting transformation to occur in their clients. FCC is designed to give form and language to that instinct.

Clinical Counselors and Therapists

For clinically trained counselors who may or may not work in explicitly religious contexts, FCC offers a richly articulated anthropology — a view of the human person — that takes seriously dimensions of inner life that symptom-focused frameworks routinely underestimate: the

formative power of early relationships, the role of habit and desire in shaping character, the distinction between insight and genuine transformation, and the depth of change required to produce lasting freedom rather than managed improvement.

FCC does not require the abandonment of clinical training or evidence-based methods. It asks instead for a reorientation of goals: from symptom reduction to person formation, from problem-solving to the patient work of becoming.

What Does It Seek to Accomplish?

Every counseling approach has a destination — an implicit or explicit idea of what success looks like. In cognitive-behavioral therapy, success looks like reduced symptoms and improved functioning. In psychodynamic work, it looks like insight into unconscious patterns. In humanistic approaches, it looks like self-actualization and authentic expression.

Formation-Centered Counseling is transparent about its destination: it seeks to form persons toward love — specifically, toward the kind of love that reflects the character of God in Christ Jesus, that gives itself freely and consistently for the good of others, and that flows not from obligation or effort but from a renewed inner life.

This is not a vague aspiration. It has specific content. FCC aims to help people become, over time, the kind of persons whose inner world — their desires, their habitual responses, their way of seeing others and themselves — is increasingly aligned with what Jesus called the “abundant life.” Not a life free from difficulty, but a life of genuine freedom, love, stability, joy, and clarity, even in the midst of difficulty.

The telos of FCC: *Not correct behavior. Not symptom management. Not even happiness. But the formation of a person whose desires, behaviors, emotions, and habits have been genuinely renewed from the inside out.*

Relief may come — and often does — in the course of formation work. Symptoms will diminish. Relationships will improve. But these are byproducts of something deeper, not the goal itself. Formation-Centered Counseling is oriented toward what endures.

The Philosophy Behind the Approach

Human Beings Are Always Being Formed

The foundational philosophical claim of FCC is that formation is not an occasional event in a person's life. It is the continuous process by which persons are shaped — by their relationships, their environments, their repeated choices, their habits, and their deepest loves. The family a person grew up in was forming them. Their early experiences of safety or danger were forming them. The patterns they developed to manage pain were forming them. And they are being formed still, right now, by everything they attend to, practice, and pursue.

This means that the presenting problem in any counseling relationship is not a random malfunction. It is the fruit of a history of formation — formed desires, formed fears, formed worldviews, formed responses to the world. Understanding that history with compassion and precision is the beginning of formation work.

The Deepest Issues Are Spiritual Before They Are Behavioral

Formation-Centered Counseling holds that the root of most human suffering is not primarily emotional, cognitive, or behavioral. It is spiritual — in the sense that it originates from the condition of the inner person: in what a person loves most deeply, what they fear most profoundly, and what they have organized their inner life around in order to feel safe and significant. Behavior is downstream of these deeper realities. Changing behavior without addressing the inner life that produces it is like trimming branches while leaving the root system entirely undisturbed.

This is not a dismissal of the importance of behavior or thinking. Both matter enormously. But FCC insists on asking: what is producing this thinking? What is driving this behavior? And is the intervention we are offering reaching that level, or only the surface?

Transformation Requires More Than Insight

One of the most consistent observations in both clinical research and pastoral experience is that insight and what one knows or even mentally ascents to alone do not produce lasting change. People can understand, clearly and thoroughly, why they do what they do — and continue doing it. They can identify their patterns, trace them to their origins, and articulate precisely how those patterns are harming them — and remain entirely captive to them.

This is not a failure of the intellect. It is a feature of the human person as Formation-Centered Counseling understands it. The inner life — the seat of desire, habit, and will — is not transformed by understanding alone. It is transformed by practiced participation in a different way of living, over time, in relationship with others and with God. Understanding is necessary. It is the beginning of the process. But it is only the beginning.

Formation Happens Through Relationship and Practice

If transformation requires more than insight, what else does it require? Formation-Centered Counseling answers: relationship and practice. Not as techniques to be applied, but as the actual medium through which persons are shaped. Human beings were designed to be formed through apprenticeship — through proximity to, and imitation of, someone further along the journey. Jesus modeled this. He did not primarily give His disciples a curriculum. He gave them Himself — and invited them to walk with Him, watch Him, and learn from that proximity how to live.

Formation-Centered Counseling draws on this model. The counseling relationship itself is understood as a formative space — not merely a place where problems are discussed, but a relational context in which the person being counseled is accompanied by someone who can help them see what they cannot see for themselves, understand what they have misunderstood, and practice what leads toward transformation.

The Human Person: A Richer Map of the Inner Life

One reason Formation-Centered Counseling is able to address dimensions of human experience that other approaches miss is that it begins with a more complete picture of what a human being actually is. Before the counselor can know where to work, they need to know what they are working with.

Most contemporary counseling frameworks operate, implicitly or explicitly, with a fairly thin understanding of the inner life: the person thinks, feels, and behaves, and the goal is to improve the quality of those three functions. FCC does not dismiss these dimensions. But it insists that they are downstream of something deeper, and that understanding that something deeper is not a theological or philosophical luxury — it is a clinical necessity.

The Soul: The Organizing Principle of the Whole Person

FCC understands the soul not as one part of the person among others but as the integrating reality that makes a human being a unified whole rather than a collection of separate functions. The soul is, in a sense, the conductor of an orchestra. When the conductor is healthy and rightly ordered, the instruments — mind, emotion, intentions, body, behaviors, and relationships — harmonize. When the conductor is weak, disordered, or working from a distorted score, the instruments play over one another and the result is internal chaos.

This is what K. Lee Brown and Formation-Centered Counseling call soul fragmentation: the misalignment of the inner faculties that produces suffering, relational dysfunction, and the persistent gap between who a person wants to be and who they find themselves being. Many presenting problems in counseling — anxiety, compulsive behavior, relational patterns, emotional dysregulation — are, at their root, symptoms of a fragmented and disordered soul. They are not the problem itself. They are the sound the orchestra makes when the conductor has lost control.

The Spirit: Real Substance, Immaterial Presence

At the center of FCC's understanding of the person is the spirit — and here the framework makes a claim that is both philosophically cautious and practically important: the spirit is real. Not metaphorical. Not symbolic. Not a vague spiritual concept. It is a genuine substance.

This may seem counterintuitive, because in everyday thinking we tend to equate “substance” with physical matter — things we can see, touch, or measure. But the physical world is full of substances that are real, powerful, and causally significant without being material in the ordinary sense. Light. Sound. Magnetism. Gravity. These are not physical objects, yet no one seriously doubts their existence or their ability to produce effects in the world. You cannot hold a magnetic field in your hand, but it will move metal across a room.

The human spirit is understood in this same category: a real, non-material substance — a personal energy or power that truly exists, that acts in the world, and that can be acted upon. It is not less real than the body. In many respects it is more fundamental — because it is the source from which the body's actions, expressions, and habits ultimately flow.

This matters enormously for counseling. If the spirit is real, then its condition is clinically relevant. A disordered, wounded, or misdirected spirit is not a metaphor for psychological distress — it is a genuine condition with genuine consequences. And genuine change requires that this level of the person be genuinely reached.

The Spirit as Heart and Mind

Formation-Centered Counseling understands the spirit as comprising two essential and inseparable dimensions: the heart and the mind. Together, they form what might be called the executive center of the person — the seat of moral consciousness, will, and the deepest loves that orient a human life.

The mind in this framework refers not simply to cognitive processing — the ability to reason, analyze, and solve problems — but to the deeper capacity for understanding, wisdom, and moral discernment. It is the faculty that asks what is true and what is real, and that provides the framework through which experience is interpreted. A mind that has been formed by fear will interpret the world differently than one that has been formed by love. A mind shaped by shame will read ambiguous situations through a particular lens. Counseling that works only on surface cognitions without reaching this deeper formative layer is addressing thoughts, not the mind that produces them.

The heart refers to the seat of desire, love, and will/intent — the faculty that determines what a person most fundamentally wants and what they organize their life around pursuing. In the biblical tradition, the heart is not primarily an emotional center in the modern sense; it is the center of the person's deepest loves and ultimate commitments. What a person loves most will govern how they think, what they choose, and how they behave — more reliably than any conscious intention. This is why behavior change so often fails: the behavior is being addressed while the heart that produces it is left untouched.

Heart and mind together — the spirit — function as the moral compass of the person. When the spirit is rightly ordered, the compass points true, and the whole person tends toward love, wisdom, and genuine flourishing. When the spirit is disordered — wounded by early experiences, misdirected by formed desires, or fragmented by suffering — the compass is unreliable, and no amount of behavioral adjustment will fix that.

The Body: Where the Inner Life Becomes Visible

The body is not separate from or incidental to formation. It is the faculty through which the immaterial becomes material — the place where what exists in the spirit is translated into actions, habits, expressions, and patterns in the physical world. Every behavior, every emotional reaction, every habitual response is the body giving expression to the inner life that animates it.

This is why Formation-Centered Counseling takes habits seriously as spiritual realities. A habit is not merely a behavioral pattern; it is a stabilized disposition of the soul that has been inscribed into the body through repetition. And it is why the body must be engaged in formation work, not bypassed. Practices done with the body — physical disciplines, intentional habits, the ordering of daily life — shape the inner person just as surely as the inner person shapes the body. Formation runs in both directions.

The Relational Dimension

No human being is formed in isolation. The relational context — family of origin, formative attachments, community, and culture — is not merely the background against which formation happens. It is one of its primary instruments. The earliest relationships of a person's life shape the spirit's basic orientations toward safety, love, and trust in ways that run deeper than conscious memory and outlast conscious intention.

Formation-Centered Counseling takes this seriously. Understanding who a person is in the present requires understanding who formed them in the past — and how those early formations are still operating, often invisibly, in their current patterns of thought, desire, and relationship.

Together — soul, spirit (heart and mind), body, and relationships — these faculties form the complete map of the human person that Formation-Centered Counseling works with. It is a richer map than most counseling frameworks employ. And it is precisely this richness that allows FCC to reach the levels of the person where lasting change is actually possible.

How It Differs from Cognitive and Behavioral Approaches

Formation-Centered Counseling does not position itself as a rejection of cognitive or behavioral approaches. Both have genuine value and have produced real benefit for many people. But FCC operates from a different set of assumptions about the nature of the human person and the nature of lasting change, and these differences produce a meaningfully different kind of counseling.

The Goal Is Different

CBT and behavioral approaches are oriented primarily toward symptom reduction and functional improvement. They ask: What are you thinking that is inaccurate, and how do we correct it? What behaviors are producing negative outcomes, and how do we change them? These

are legitimate questions. But they are not the organizing questions of Formation-Centered Counseling.

FCC asks instead: Who is this person at the level of their deepest desires and loves? What has formed them into who they are? What kind of person are they becoming? The goal is not a corrected thought pattern or a modified behavior — at least, that is not the first goal, though it is undeniably an important part of the total counseling process. The first goal — the horse that must come before the cart — is a renewed inner life that naturally produces different thoughts, different behaviors, and a different way of inhabiting the world.

The Human Person Is Understood Differently

Cognitive and behavioral models tend to work within a relatively thin anthropology — one in which the person is primarily understood as a thinking, behaving organism, and change is primarily a matter of correcting thoughts or conditioning different behaviors. This is not wrong as far as it goes, but Formation-Centered Counseling argues that it does not go far enough.

FCC operates from a richer, more integrated understanding of the human person — one that takes seriously not just thoughts and behaviors, but the will/intentions, the desires, the habits, the loves, the relational history, and the spiritual dimension. As outlined in the previous section, these are not peripheral additions to the “real” person. They are, in many cases, precisely where the real person lives — and where the deepest work of transformation must occur.

The Mechanism of Change Is Different

In cognitive approaches, the primary mechanism of change is the identification and restructuring of maladaptive thoughts. In behavioral approaches, it is conditioning — the systematic reinforcement of different response patterns. Both are working, essentially, from the outside in: applying external frameworks and techniques to produce internal change.

Formation-Centered Counseling works from the inside out. It attends first to the inner person — the desires, loves, and orientations of the heart and mind that are producing the patterns of thought and behavior — and seeks to engage the process by which those inner realities are gradually renewed. The change it seeks is not the application of a corrective technique. It is the natural fruit of a person whose inner life is genuinely different.

A useful analogy: *CBT works on the fruit. FCC works on the tree. Both fruit and tree matter. But the fruit will only change durably if the tree is changed.*

The Counselor's Role Is Different

In many therapeutic models, the counselor is the expert. Though this mindset and accompanying language is shifting secularly, the licensed counselor is still thought of as the trained professional who diagnoses, interprets, and applies the appropriate intervention. This is not wrong; training and expertise genuinely matter. But Formation-Centered Counseling reframes the counselor's primary role. In FCC, the counselor is a guide in the transformation process — a more experienced companion who walks alongside the person being counseled, helps them see what they cannot see, and co-labors with what God is already doing in their life.

This reframing has practical consequences. It produces humility rather than authority in the counseling room. It places the source of transformation where it belongs — not in the skill of the counselor, but in the work of the Spirit in the life of the person. And it shapes how the counselor prepares for sessions: less in mastering new techniques (though there is still an emphasis here), more in prayer, in attention, and in the ongoing formation of their own inner life.

What Formation-Centered Counseling Is Not

Because FCC draws on language and concepts that appear in multiple streams of thought — theological, clinical, philosophical — it is worth being explicit about what it is not.

It is not Christian or biblical therapy with a new label. It is not therapy with Bible verses added. It is a distinct modality with its own structure and aims. It does not simply Christianize existing therapeutic frameworks; it builds from a different foundation.

That said, it is worth acknowledging something: while K. Lee Brown's approach is inherently rooted in Scripture and depends on the work of Christ and His Spirit, the human "spirit" is not an exclusively Christian faculty. God created every human being with a spirit, and across history many have attempted to form and transform the spirit through means other than Christ — with results that are real but temporary, and never sufficient to produce the lasting transformation and abundant life that Christ makes possible. It is likely that some secular practitioners will seek to adopt FCC's language and frameworks while omitting the theological foundations. That is their prerogative. But Formation-Centered Counseling holds that the creator of the human spirit is the only one with authority and resource to genuinely renew it.

It is not a rejection of clinical training. Quite the contrary. Clinically trained counselors bring genuine skill and valuable tools to the work of formation. FCC does not ask them to abandon those tools. It asks them to hold those tools in service of a larger vision of the human person and the counseling relationship.

It is not a formula. Formation is by nature relational, organic, and Spirit-dependent. FCC provides a framework and a vocabulary, but it resists the reduction of transformation to a technique or a protocol. The counselor who approaches FCC looking for a step-by-step method will need to make peace with ambiguity and mystery. This is also where purely secular attempts to replicate formation work will fall short. From the Stoics to the Buddhists, across millennia of serious effort, every approach that places the full burden of spiritual transformation in the hands of the individual eventually meets the same limit: it is like asking a statue to hold its own hammer and chisel. FCC asserts that only the creator of the human spirit is equipped to be the primary agent of spiritual transformation.

It is not designed for a specific problem population. FCC is a foundational approach to counseling, not a specialized intervention for a particular disorder. It can inform and shape the work with virtually any presenting concern — relational, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, or existential — because it is working at the level beneath all presenting concerns: the formation of the human spirit, the heart and mind, from which everything else flows.

The Broader Conversation: What History Tells Us

Formation-Centered Counseling did not emerge from a vacuum. The longing to address the deeper dimensions of the inner life is as old as human reflection itself. Two of the most sophisticated pre-Christian traditions — Stoicism and Buddhism — recognized centuries ago that surface-level behavioral change is insufficient, and they developed rigorous practices aimed at transforming desire, attention, and inner orientation.

The Stoics — Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca — understood that suffering arises not from external circumstances but from the inner disposition we bring to them. They developed disciplines of attention, voluntary discomfort, and philosophical reflection aimed at retraining the soul. The Buddhist tradition similarly identified craving and attachment as the roots of suffering

and constructed an entire path of practice — meditation, mindfulness, ethical discipline — aimed at the transformation of the inner life. These are not trivial contributions.

And yet both traditions share a fundamental limitation: they cannot reach the deepest problem. They can discipline desire, but they cannot renew it. They can train the will, but they cannot reorient it toward its proper end. They can cultivate stillness, but they cannot restore a broken relationship with the source of life. They work, in essence, with the tools available to the very inner life that needs to be transformed — which is a bit like asking a broken compass to find north.

Contemporary therapeutic approaches — including mindfulness-based therapies that draw on the Buddhist tradition, and stoic-adjacent rational-emotive approaches — have genuine clinical efficacy and deserve genuine respect. Formation-Centered Counseling acknowledges this and learns from it. But FCC maintains that what these approaches cannot supply is precisely what makes transformation both possible and directionally sound: the work of the Spirit of God in the deepest places of the human person, renewing what is broken and reorienting what has been disordered.

The abundant life Jesus described is not merely better psychological functioning. It is a participation in a kind of life — love, freedom, joy, and deep settledness — that flows from a genuinely renewed inner person. And that renewal, Formation-Centered Counseling holds, is the distinctive and irreplaceable work of the One who made the spirit in the first place.

An Invitation

Formation-Centered Counseling is still developing. It is not a finished system but a growing and maturing framework — one that is being refined through practice, reflection, and the ongoing work of formation in the counselors who carry it.

What it offers, at this stage, is a different way of seeing. A different approach and orientation to care. A different set of questions. A different understanding of what the counseling relationship is for and what it can, at its best, accomplish. And a conviction that the people who sit across from us — broken, searching, hoping, afraid — deserve more than symptom management. They deserve to be accompanied in becoming who they were made to be.

That is what Formation-Centered Counseling exists to do.

“The question is not “what is wrong with this person?” — but “how did they come to be this type of person?” and “who are they becoming moving forward?” And further we must ask whether or not the help we offer is oriented toward that larger, truer, more beautiful destination.”

— K. Lee Brown

About the Author

K. Lee Brown is the founder and director of Whole Soul Counsel and the Whole Soul Institute, and the developer of the Formation-Centered Counseling modality. He trains clinical and pastoral counselors in formation-centered practice and works with individuals, churches, and organizations seeking a deeper, more integrated approach to the care of human souls.