

Learning to Counsel

by William Stewart

Preface

Counselling skills are not used only by professional counsellors. They are relevant to a wide range of people as part of their work: for example, volunteer counsellors, teachers, tutors, lecturers, trainers, group workers, managers at all levels, pastoral care workers, health service workers, statutory and voluntary sector workers and alternative therapists. We believe that counselling skills can be of value in all human relationships.

The framework of this book is based on how we teach counselling skills to students who attend our courses, which has proved a popular and effective way of learning. Its roots are firmly based in the person-centred approach of Carl Rogers, and the skills based approach of Gerard Egan.

Carl Rogers suggested that if counsellors can plant the core conditions necessary for growth — genuineness, non-possessive warmth and unconditional positive regard — these enable a healthy and nurturing relationship between counsellor and client to flourish. He believed that these conditions were sufficient to bring about growth and change in clients, enabling them to move towards fulfilment of their own potential.

Gerard Egan suggested that in addition to providing the core conditions, counsellors may need to help clients make decisions, clarify and set goals, and to support them with implementing their action. In his three stage model, Egan analyses the skills which the counsellor needs to develop and use for each stage of the model.

To become a professional counsellor takes years of training and supervised counselling practice, and we would not presume to suggest that by reading this book you will have at your fingertips all that it takes to become an effective counsellor. A knowledge and understanding of the major theories of counselling is important. However, counsellors can benefit from a model to guide them in their work, together with a repertoire of skills, and a careful study of the principles outlined here will provide a basis for counselling practice.

The book has been arranged in a logical sequence and we recommend that you work through the case studies and exercises in the sequence presented. Throughout most of the chapters we follow five fictional clients to demonstrate the skills being discussed.

We hope the book will provide you with some understanding of what is involved in counselling, will help you achieve some insight and appreciation of counselling, and will help you develop the skills you need to counsel more effectively.

To avoid the clumsy formula of he/she we have used them interchangeably throughout the book.

*Jan Sutton
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CHAPTER 1

DEFINING COUNSELLING

What Is Counselling?

The term 'counselling' is frequently confused with advice giving, and dictionaries still define counselling in terms of advice and guidance. The differences are:

Advice

- Mainly a one-way exchange
- Giving an opinion
- Making a judgment
- Making a recommendation
- Persuasive

Guidance

- Mainly a one-way exchange
- Showing the way
- Educating
- Influencing
- Instructing
- Encouraging

Counselling

- A two-way collaborative exchange
- A supportive relationship that: enables clients to explore their problems freely
- enables clients to understand the need for action
- enables clients to take appropriate action.

The primary difference between counselling and other forms of helping is the way in which the counsellor listens. The counsellor listens not only to the words spoken, or the problem presented, but also to the person as a whole.

Understanding confidentiality

Counsellors are frequently the observers, and often the recipients, of confidential material about clients, their life situations and intimate details of their families. Confidentiality, at first glance, is deceptively simple. It means not

disclosing secret details about another person which have been disclosed during counselling.

It is helpful to distinguish between *secret* and *confidential material*. Everything said in a counselling interview is confidential, but not everything is a secret. The belief that absolutely everything the client says must never be shared with anyone can lead to problems.

Consider the case of the man who admits that he has been stealing from the organisation in which you both work. Should this information be passed on and to whom? If you become party to information which you feel must be passed on, you ought to explain to the client why and to whom you must pass it.

Professional counsellors are bound by certain ethics, which are not applicable in their totality to people using counselling skills as part of their repertoire of work skills. *Feelings* as well as *facts* should not be shared indiscriminately.

The limits of confidentiality

Confidentiality is limited by:

- Whose needs predominate?
- Who would be harmed?
- Do the needs of the agency have to be considered?
- The laws of the land.
- Do the needs of the wider society have to be considered?
- Who might be placed at risk?

Individual counsellors need to be quite clear what information, gleaned through counselling, they may pass on and to whom. Some clients need to be reassured about confidentiality. Counsellors should take time to clarify precisely what the client understands by confidentiality.

The person's right to secrecy is never absolute. Counsellors may be required by a court to pass on secret information. Failure to do so may involve imprisonment for contempt of court.

An example of selective confidentiality

Carlos was being admitted **to** hospital for surgery. During the course of the assessment interview he revealed that he had a criminal record. The nurse decided that this information, if withheld, would not affect the treatment. She did not include this detail in the notes, but concentrated on Carlos' anxiety about his forthcoming exploratory operation for cancer.

Understanding the counselling process

The main aspects include:

- providing the core conditions for effective counselling to take place:

- genuineness, non-possessive warmth, unconditional positive regard
- acceptance
- demonstrating empathy
- remaining impartial and suspending judgment
- getting on the client's wavelength
- listening actively and responding appropriately
- being able to enter the client's frame of reference
- offering support
- keeping pace with the client
- expressing understanding of the client's feelings
- keeping the interview moving forward
- maintaining objectivity when planning action
- using silences constructively: waiting for a reply
- reading between the lines: listening to what the client is feeling but is not actually communicating
- saying 'goodbye' constructively
- using the skills of:
 - primary level empathy
 - active listening
 - attending
 - paraphrasing content
 - reflecting feelings
 - open questions
 - summarising
 - focusing
 - being concrete
 - challenging and confronting the client
 - advanced level empathy
 - immediacy
 - disclosing self.

What defines a 'counsellor'?

Not every person who uses counselling skills is designated a 'counsellor'. We can distinguish two broad groups of people who use counselling skills: people who are called 'counsellors', who engage in counselling as a distinct occupation, and others who use counselling skills as part of their other skills. They would be 'temporary in the role'.

Learning to counsel

There are three basic elements involved in learning to counsel effectively:

1. **Knowledge and understanding.** This involves:
 - gaining knowledge of the theory of personality development underlying the counselling approach used;
 - gaining knowledge of common psychological processes, for example bereavement and loss and relationship interactions.
2. **Developing** skills. This involves:
 - changing behaviour, which can feel very uncomfortable to begin with. However, in time, and with practice, the skills feel

more comfortable and you start to use them without even thinking about them - they become part of your style.

3. **Personal development.** This involves:
 - o being able to separate your own feelings from those of the client. This means increasing self-awareness: the more self-awareness gained, the more you are able to understand your clients.

The primary focus of this book is on two of the elements involved in learning to counsel effectively:

- skills development
- personal development.

Summary

- The primary difference between counselling and other forms of helping is the way in which the counsellor listens.
- Everything said in a counselling interview is confidential, but not everything is secret.
- Counselling is a process whereby counsellors establish an environment of trust and safety that enables clients to:
 - o explore their problems freely
 - o understand their problems and the need for action
 - o manage their problems by taking appropriate action.
- There are three basic elements involved in counselling training:
 1. knowledge of counselling theory
 2. skills development
 3. personal development.