



# UNIT-8

# Counselling Skills

## Learning Outcomes

**By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:**

- ✓ Differentiate between counselling and guidance
- ✓ Understand the qualities and characteristics of a good counsellor
- ✓ Describe the primary goals of counselling
- ✓ Describe the various stages of the counselling process
- ✓ Build good relationships of trust and respect with clients
- ✓ Help clients identify and define meaningful goals

## Unit 9

### Counselling Skills

Counselling can be classified as both a science and an art form in its own right. Providing a concise and accurate definition for counselling isn't easy, as it means different things to different people. It is often referred to as a profession of 'helping' in a variety of areas, sought on a short-term basis and based on a combination of theory, experience and interpersonal skills.

For the most part, counselling exists to help individuals from a variety of backgrounds overcome difficulties and resolve challenges in their lives. Counselling can be sought as a means to overcome behavioural issues, emotional difficulties, relationship problems, social challenges and much more besides. As each individual case is different, counselling means something completely different to everyone who seeks it.

There are, however, several common points that apply in all types of counselling, as identified by the American Psychological Association and the American Counselling Association. A few examples of which include the following:

#### Counselling is a Profession

This means that in order for an individual to offer their services as a counsellor, they must first study the subject at an advanced level and obtain a formal qualification. This could be anything from an advanced diploma to a master's degree or a doctorate, though an appropriate educational background is considered mandatory.

#### Counsellors focus on Specialist Fields within the Profession

The professional counsellor will only ever offer their services in accordance with their experience, expertise and areas of specialist knowledge. For example, one counsellor may specialise in addiction and rehabilitation counselling, while a second may excel in marriage and relationship counselling. No counsellor should attempt to cover all aspects of the profession, as to do so is to spread yourself far too thinly.

#### Counselling is conducted with clients within the "Normal Range" Psychologically.

This means that those who are provided with counselling do not suffer from any major or long-term psychological health problems. Counselling and psychiatry are two very different fields that focus on entirely different issues. Counsellors work exclusively with those who are in a healthy or 'normal' psychological state, who simply need help overcoming a short-term and correctable issue.

#### Counselling is a process that helps make decisions and formulate new ways of behaving, feeling, and thinking...

It's a longstanding misconception, but counsellors are not there to hand their clients easy answers on the proverbial silver platter. Instead, they simply exist to open doors and empower their clients with the confidence and motivation needed to get through them. It is a profession that focuses on enabling change and improvement, through a combination of goal setting and meaningful discussion.

Roughly summarised, you could therefore describe counselling as a structured approach to the resolution of situational and developmental problems that are strictly short-term, and experienced by individuals who are otherwise psychologically healthy.

While it's technically possible for anyone wishing to do so to provide counselling services, the industry as a whole complies with a long list of standardised guidelines and codes of practice for the benefit of those seeking counselling. Formal training may not be a legal requirement to work in some aspects of the profession, but is nonetheless considered mandatory for anyone who wishes to become a credible and successful counsellor.

### **The Primary Goals of Counselling**

Again, the specific goals of any course of counselling will be determined entirely on the basis of the client's situation, requirements and priorities. Nevertheless, five primary objectives (or classifications thereof) govern everything that takes place during the course of counselling.

These five primary goals of counselling are as follows:

#### **Facilitating Behaviour Change**

This means providing clients with the support and empowerment they need to make positive behavioural changes. Achieving goals and overcoming issues is almost always about altering your behaviour and your perceptions, which begins with a realistic goal setting.

#### **Promoting Decision Making**

As previously mentioned, the counsellor is not there to make decisions on behalf of their clients, nor provide them with easy answers. They are simply there to provide the encouragement and often the emotional outlet the client needs to face up to and make important decisions for their betterment.

#### **Enhancing Coping Skills**

Counsellors can also help clients enhance and improve their coping skills, making it easy to deal with difficult situations that may be beyond their control.

#### **Improving Relationships**

Counselling often seeks to improve relationships. This refers to the client's relationship to other people, along with the way they see and interpret themselves. Relationship issues can be anything from social anxiety to poor self-esteem to image issues to all types of intimacy issues.

#### **Facilitating the Client's Potential**

Ultimately, it is the job of the counsellor to provide the client with the professional support and empowerment needed to enable them to reach their full potential. 'Potential' could refer to achieving ambitious goals and objectives, or turning a corner on negative habits and lifestyle choices.

### **What's the Difference between Counselling and Guidance?**

Counselling and guidance go hand in hand, though the two concepts are inherently different. The biggest

difference being that guidance typically refers to the provision of concrete advice and suggestions on something specific, in accordance with the advanced knowledge and experience of the individual providing it.

A typical example being a careers officer in an educational environment, who may offer students guidance and suggestions on future study or career options. Unlike the counsellor, these individuals use their specialist knowledge and experience to provide direct advice and suggestions to those they support with regard to their options and what they should do.

By contrast, a counsellor would ask a series of questions and discuss the matter as openly and honestly as possible, in order to empower the student to make their own decisions as to what to do next. While it's not to say that counsellors never provide direct guidance, counselling focuses more on changing perspectives and viewpoints to help clients find answers and solutions for themselves.

In addition, guidance will usually be provided when the individual in question is struggling with a decision such as choosing a course, a college or a career. Counselling is sought when the individual in question is struggling with a temporary personal or socio-psychological issue that is causing them trouble.

Guidance can also be provided to a group of people at the same time, whereas counselling is always one-to-one and strictly confidential in nature.

## Counselling Concepts

Newcomers to counselling often assume that the process consists primarily of a formal 'question and answer' format, in order to find the answers the client seeks. In reality, successful counselling is all about building a relationship between the two parties, enabling them to work together on the issues the client is facing.

This is why many people make the mistake of assuming that instead of a counsellor, they can simply talk out their issues with a friend or family member. When in reality, the relationship between the client and the counsellor is completely different for a number of reasons:

1. Counsellors are legally and ethically bound by strict confidentiality rules. Under no circumstances must anything the client says or does during any of the sessions be shared with anyone else. Friends and family members cannot necessarily promise the same level of confidentiality.
2. Counsellors are extensively trained and, in most instances, will have spent many years focusing on a specific aspect of counselling. They will have also encountered multiple cases like yours before, enabling them to provide support on a level that exceeds the capabilities of even your closest friends and family members.
3. It can be surprisingly difficult to be completely honest and open with those you care about. Consulting with a counsellor can be much more liberating, as nothing you say will have any repercussions or lead to any potential complications with friends and family members.
4. When consulting with a counsellor, the client understands that it is their time to focus on themselves and themselves alone. When consulting with a friend or family member, a certain amount of reciprocity and empathy is expected on both parts.

5. The counsellor works in accordance with the preferences and schedule of the client, providing them with their complete and undivided attention for the duration of every session. Again, something friends and family members may not be able to guarantee.

## The Qualities, Capabilities and Characteristics of the Counsellor

Counselling is one of many professions where success is built on far more than academic achievements and experience alone. You can study the intricacies of counselling at the most advanced level, but you cannot and will not get by without the in-built qualities and characteristics of a good counsellor.

While all counsellors take a slightly different approach to the provision of their services, all good counsellors have the following qualities and capabilities:

- A naturally patient and empathetic attitude
- The desire to build self-esteem in others
- Understanding and respect for information confidentiality
- The ability to provide sincere reassurance
- A natural knack for asking the right questions at the right time
- Tenacity and a willingness to take on challenges cases
- Advanced organisational and time management skills
- Flawless concentration and listening skills
- The ability to conduct difficult affairs with humility
- Confidence that never crosses into arrogance
- An overwhelming desire to help other people

## The Counselling Process – How Does it Work?

A set formula for a 'perfect' counselling session doesn't exist, for the simple reason that every client, every session and every interaction is 100% unique. For the most part, counselling provides clients with the opportunity to acknowledge, express and understand thoughts and feelings they may have previously kept hidden.

It's only when we're completely and unashamedly honest with ourselves that we're able to face up to the realities of whatever it is we're feeling and, by extension, what may be holding us back. By providing clients with a safe and completely confidential environment to get their feelings out in the open, that's exactly what tends to happen.

After which, it's a case of providing the client with the support and empowerment needed to make whatever decisions and behavioural changes are necessary to help them achieve their goals.

### How Many Appointments Are Typically Necessary?

Most clients attend counselling sessions once a week, but it's not uncommon for sessions to be organised more frequently, or perhaps just once a fortnight. The actual length of the relationship should never be predetermined. Establishing a formal deadline (say 12 weeks) can make it difficult to remain objective, as

both the counsellor and the client are aware that there is a finite amount of time available.

### **How Much do Counsellors Charge Their Clients?**

Counsellors are free to develop their own unique pricing structures, though are advised to do so in accordance with the services being provided by similarly experienced and reputable counsellors in their locality. In any case, it's essential to clarify your fee structure with clients at the earliest possible stage, in order to avoid any possible ambiguity or potential disputes at a later date.

### **How Long Does It Take Before Counselling Starts 'Working'?**

Not only is this an impossible question to answer, it is also a dangerous question to ask. For example, if you were to state that 75% of your clients begin feeling a real difference after five sessions, this could make anyone who needs more than five sessions feel abnormal. It could also motivate clients to restrict themselves to five sessions only, even if they could actually benefit from 10 or 15 sessions.

Some clients feel better after a single initial conversation – others see and feel no real difference for several weeks. Avoid generalisations like these, which can be dangerous for both you as a counsellor and for your clients.

### **Am I Ready to Offer Professional Counselling?**

You've studied counselling at an advanced level, you've enhanced your CV with an endorsed award and you're ready to get to work. But does this actually mean you are 100% ready to begin offering your services as a counsellor?

If any of the following apply, you may not be ready to go into business, or perhaps need to adjust your approach in order to build a successful career:

- You lack genuine drive, passion and motivation
- You feel little enthusiasm to help your clients
- You find your clients' issues boring or annoying
- You're tempted to discuss your work with others
- You feel awkward or uncomfortable consulting with clients
- You lack the confidence to ask honest and open questions
- You act on impulse or emotion at any time
- You're angered by negative comments or feedback

Some of the above – particularly those in relation to confidence – are perfectly normal while getting to grips with the fundamentals of counselling as a newcomer. However, all such issues should be acknowledged and addressed before you begin offering your services to clients in need of your help and support.

## **Common Counselling Myths and Untruths**

It's not unfair or untrue to say that the vast majority of people who have never experienced counselling have a questionable idea as to what the whole thing entails. The result of which is a seemingly endless list of myths and untruths, which can be damaging for counsellors, their clients and the industry as a whole.

Anyone interested in pursuing a career as a counsellor should expect to encounter a wide variety of misconceptions along the way, and therefore should ensure they know the truth behind them.

We'll now be taking a look at some of the most common counselling myths and untruths, which even today continue to paint an inaccurate picture of the industry:

**Myth: You have to be 'crazy' to need counseling**

Perhaps the most dangerous and devastatingly inaccurate myth of all, counselling is not only for those who are struggling with extreme difficulties in life. More importantly, individuals with genuine psychological illnesses cannot and should not be treated by counsellors, but by psychiatrists and psychologists. Counsellors can provide help and support with an extensive list of behavioural and emotional issues – anything from anxiety to coping with bereavement to confidence issues to addiction and relationship issues. In all instances, early-stage issues 'nipped in the bud' before being allowed to escalate are far easier to address, so counselling should be sought at the earliest possible juncture.

**Myth: The role of the counsellor is to give suggestions and advice**

While it is not entirely unusual for a counsellor to provide advice on certain issues, their primary role is not to offer direct suggestions. Counsellors are reluctant to provide direct suggestions, as the consequences of doing so could be severe. In addition, counselling is about providing clients with the confidence, motivation, empowerment and open-mindedness needed to make their own decisions. If a counsellor makes decisions on behalf of the client, this isn't counselling.

**Myth: Counselling should be sought as a last resort**

As previously touched upon, it's actually quite the contrary – counselling should be sought at the earliest possible juncture, rather than waiting for problems to escalate. Think of it in the typical context of a married couple with relationship issues. Option 1 is to seek counselling the moment things become turbulent, in order to identify and work through the issues at an early stage. Option 2 is wait until the only options on the table are counselling or divorce, by which point the relationship has deteriorated so badly it may be impossible to repair.

**Myth: Friends and family are ideal counsellors as they know you and care about you**

Much as this seems like a logical argument, the opposite is in fact true. The exact reason friends and family cannot provide 'proper' counselling is because they know you and they care about you. They therefore cannot be relied upon to be impartial, objective and honest. Nor is it possible to be as open and honest with a friend or family member as you can be with a counsellor you meet on a purely professional level.

**Myth: I won't have anything to say – it will be one long awkward silence**

It's often assumed that counsellors simply sit there in silence and wait for their clients to lead the conversation. In reality, professional counsellors are extensively trained in the art of getting their clients to open up. They know how to ask the right questions, when to probe specific issues and how to ensure periods of silence are avoided at all costs. It's never up to the client to keep the conversation moving – this is where the art of effective counselling lies.

**Myth: Once you start attending counselling, you cannot stop**

Perhaps not literally, though there are some who avoid counselling due to the assumption that it takes too long to achieve viable results. As previously touched upon, the length of time needed for a client to achieve their goals will always be unique. Some feel remarkably different after just a couple of sessions, whereas others need dozens of meetings to achieve the same results.

**Myth: It's inevitable that others will find out**

Professional counsellors have an ethical and legal obligation to safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of their clients. Under no circumstances are they permitted to discuss anything that took place during any of their sessions with anyone else. Confidentiality rules can only be broken if a counsellor believes a client may pose a direct risk to their own safety or that of anyone else. In all other instances, everything must be kept 100% confidential in accordance with law.

**Myth: Relationship counselling is all about assigning blame**

Quite the opposite – relationship counselling is actually about mutual understanding and the elimination of 'blame' in the traditional sense. Relationships only work when both parties are equally involved, committed and aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. To assign blame is to tip the balance of the relationship disproportionately in one direction or the other, which almost always does more harm than good.

**Myth: Counselling is a miracle cure for all types of issues**

Realistically, counselling isn't a 'cure' for anything at all. It's simply a process that facilitates positive life changes and the ability to both acknowledge and overcome obstacles. Clients should never approach counselling under the impression that all of their issues and areas of dissatisfaction in life will suddenly disappear. If this is the case, it is the responsibility of the counsellor to educate them as to what counselling actually entails.

**Myth: Counselling costs too much for most people to afford**

While it's true to say that counselling costs vary wildly from one provider and region to the next, counselling in general can be surprisingly inexpensive. It can even be provided free of charge on the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom, or under similar public health plans elsewhere. If a client has health insurance, this may also cover their counselling costs.

**Myth: It's impossible to open up to a complete stranger**

Many clients worry that they'll be unable to be completely honest and open about important issues with someone they've never met before. When in practice, it's significantly easier to open up to a stranger than someone you have a social or emotional connection with. Clients may understandably feel nervous and demonstrate reluctance to share openly during the first couple of sessions, but this soon gives way to more frank and honest conversation.

**Myth: Attending counselling means accepting failure**

To accept failure is to give up on whatever it is that's causing problems in your life. To attend counselling is to take a proactive and logical approach to the resolution of the issues you are facing. Hence, it is

nonsensical and completely inaccurate to associate counselling with failure. Just as long as you are making positive attempts to make important changes in your life, you've neither failed nor given up.

**Myth: My counsellor will suggest I take medication**

This isn't the case at all, for the simple reason that the vast majority of counsellors are not qualified or licensed to write prescriptions. Nor are they equipped to handle the kinds of psychological or physical health issues that would warrant the use of medication. A counsellor may recommend that a client speaks to a doctor or a specialist who may subsequently suggest medication, but is extremely unlikely to make a direct recommendation.

**Myth: Counselling is all about focusing on positives**

Not at all, as in order to make progress in life it is sometimes necessary to focus attention on the negatives. At least, to such an extent as to confront uncomfortable issues, deal with personal pain and subsequently make positive progress. In the example of an individual struggling to cope with the bereavement of a loved one, it could simply be that they have not yet allowed themselves to grieve appropriately. In which case, all the positive thinking in the world isn't going to help them – it needs to be confronted head-on.

**Myth: Counsellors force you to discuss uncomfortable subjects**

While it's the job of the counsellor to encourage honest and open discussion, they also understand the importance of comfort and discretion. In any instance where a client is clearly uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss a difficult subject, a good counsellor will never try to force them to do so. They may attempt to revisit the topic at a later date to see if the client is willing to discuss it, but will never apply pressure of any kind in such instances.

**Myth: Counsellors care more about the money than their clients**

The simple fact of the matter is that if you don't care deeply for the wellbeing of the clients you work with, you will not succeed as a counsellor. Getting into counselling purely for the money is a fruitless endeavour and a waste of time. You cannot and will not succeed if you're more concerned with the cash you collect than the clients you work with. Hence, every successful counsellor is far more interested in their clients than the financial aspects of the job.

**Myth: Counselling is best suited to a specific gender or age group**

Statistically speaking, men are more likely to seek counselling than women. Something psychologists have attributed to the fact that women typically have better control over their emotions than men. But this doesn't mean that counselling is best suited to one specific gender or age group. Personal and emotional problems don't discriminate in terms of who they affect, meaning anyone with obstacles to overcome could benefit from counselling.

**Myth: You have to sign up for a long-term course**

Some counsellors place excessively heavy emphasis on long-term agreements and binding contracts. These are the counsellors that typically prioritise financial gain over their clients' best interests. Elsewhere, the more professional and responsible counsellor provides the client with complete freedom of choice. If they

want to sign up for just one or two sessions to see how things work, there should be no pressure to agree to a longer course. Nor should the counsellor ever suggest immediately after meeting a new client that they need a specific number of sessions to reach their goals.

## When Should an Individual Seek Counselling?

Technically speaking, counselling can prove helpful when facing almost any short-term issue or obstacle to overcome. Be it emotional, social, professional or personal, counselling is technically limitless in scope. Just a few of the most common problems brought the way of counsellors by clients of all ages include the following:

- Trouble getting ahead at work
- Problems with stress or anxiety
- Difficulties dealing with bereavement
- Parental separation issues
- Academic performance problems
- All types of major life transitions
- Feelings of loneliness or isolation
- Intimacy and relationship issues
- Problems with social relationships
- Sexual orientation confusion
- Depression and general apathy
- Concerns regarding substance abuse
- The inability to make decisions
- Uncontrollable anger
- Low self-esteem or lack of confidence
- Conflicts with family or friends
- Career dissatisfaction
- Concerns regarding abusive relationships
- Worries about the future
- Panic attacks and paranoia
- Addictive or habitual behaviours
- Eating disorders and body confidence issues
- Questions or concerns regarding pregnancy
- Difficulties coping as a new parent

These are just some of the everyday issues that prompt clients of all ages to seek counselling. Problems which in most instances tend to be overlooked or ignored by clients until they reach an advanced stage, before the decision is made to confront them.

Unfortunately, there is nothing the counsellor can do to encourage clients to contact them when the issues they're facing are at a relatively early stage. Usually, by the time the client makes contact with a counsellor,

things have already escalated and become difficult to cope with.

### **Counselling with no Immediately Identifiable Issue**

Some of the most challenging (though undeniably interesting) cases the counsellor encounters are those clients who cannot pinpoint their issues or obstacles. Many people seek counselling with no specific objective or issue in mind – they simply feel dissatisfied with the way their life is going.

In such cases, it's the job of the counsellor to encourage the kind of open discourse needed to identify the root cause of the issue. Working with clients who have no idea what they want isn't easy, but is nonetheless an everyday standard for the professional counsellor.

### **When is Counselling Considered Necessary?**

Each of the instances outlined above refers to an issue where an individual may benefit from counselling. Though technically optional, professional counselling could prove enormously beneficial for anyone experiencing these common concerns.

However, there are also instances where counselling should be considered mandatory, rather than optional. It's one thing to allow minor personal grievances and obstacles to hold you back, but it something else entirely to let your life be controlled or spoiled entirely by something correctable.

This is why, according to the world's leading counselling authorities, counselling should be considered 100% necessary by anyone affected by any of the following:

- A state of permanent anger or irritation
- Constant mood swings and lack of emotional control
- Living with extreme anxiety or paranoia
- The total inability to trust other people
- A dangerous lack of self confidence
- The inability to make any decisions whatsoever
- Feelings of resentment for life in general
- Daily difficulties finding motivation
- Uncontrollable fear in social situations
- Ongoing isolation and loneliness
- Excessive or disproportionate jealousy
- Inexplicable feelings of worthlessness

It's worth noting that in all of these cases, the issues the individual is facing may be attributed to a longer-term psychological health issue. In which case, they may need to be referred to an appropriate specialist for a more detailed diagnosis.

However, counselling is typically recommended as the first port of call for anyone struggling to cope with issues such as these. It may represent the first of many steps on the road to improved wellbeing, but is by far the more important step of the entire journey.

## The Counselling Process

As touched upon previously, there is technically no such thing as a set formula for the 'perfect' counselling session. In each and every instance, the counselling process is fundamentally different from one client and case to the next.

Nevertheless, establishing basic ground rules and getting the counsellor-client relationship off to a good start can and should follow a structured process. Detailed below are the 10 steps that should be followed (at least in principle) when dealing with new clients and building a good working relationship:

1. Encourage open and honest discussion
2. Listen intently at all times
3. Try to ensure the client does most of the talking
4. Answer questions honestly and openly
5. Discuss the goals and views of the client
6. Talk about the steps needed to achieve them
7. Watch for warning signs of threatening behaviour
8. Remain positive and encourage optimism
9. Offer feedback and arrange additional sessions
10. Agree with the client on what should happen next

This represents just the basic framework of how the relationship between the counsellor and the client should be established. Remaining personable at all times is important, though not to such an extent as to become overly informal or unprofessional.

### The Five Stages of the Counselling Process

Following a set formula in terms of what to do, when to do it, what to say and how to respond is a recipe for ineffective counselling. Instead, it's a case of familiarising yourself with the basic framework of how counsellors get to know their clients, and subsequently choosing an appropriate course of action.

There is no 'X + Y = Z' silver-bullet approach to counselling – nor are there any shortcuts to success. That said, the counselling process in general can be much easier to understand and get to grips with, if divided into five primary stages as follows:

#### **STAGE ONE: Building Relationships and Initial Discussions**

The first (and arguably most important) step of the process is to begin building a relationship with the client and familiarise them with what you can offer as a counsellor. It's worth noting at this point that most of the clients you encounter will be somewhat apprehensive, nervous or downright sceptical about the whole thing. Your job being not to convince them that they need counselling, but to put them at ease, answer their questions and listen to what they have to say.

Successfully building rapport and a sense of trust with new clients means focusing heavily on the following:

- Ñ Providing complete assurances of discretion and confidentiality
- Ñ Letting the client know that they are free to talk in complete confidence
- Ñ Allowing upset and confused clients to vent openly without judgment
- Ñ Openly discussing the client's expectations regarding their counselling programme
- Ñ Making it clear as to what you can and cannot do as a counsellor
- Ñ Pledging your commitment to the client and their goals
- Ñ Ensuring they understand they're free to walk away at any time

The way that you approach all of the above will be determined by your personality, your approach to counselling and the individual you are dealing with at the time. When you first welcome a new client into your office, there are 10 good-practice guidelines that can help ensure things get off to a positive start. These are:

1. Introduce yourself politely and positively with a handshake
2. Take a seat and invite the client to sit down
3. Ask the client if they would like a glass of water, a coffee etc.
4. Ask the client how they would like to be addressed (title, first name etc.)
5. Use small talk and social conversation to reduce initial awkwardness
6. Take note of the client's body language and consider their emotional state
7. Ask the client to provide a full and frank summary of why they came
8. Listen intently and try to ensure the client leads the conversation
9. Indicate a sincere and genuine interest in their case
10. Give a brief overview of what happens next

One important note at this stage – making any outright guarantees or reassuring promises is to be avoided. The relationship is too early for you to be able to honestly and realistically predict the outcome. Indicate that you are confident in your capabilities to help them and will do everything you can to do so, while steering clear of concrete guarantees at all times.

## **STAGE TWO: Discussion and Assessment of the Issue**

It's at this stage that you will begin the process of both discussing and analysing the problem or issue that is affecting the client. Careful questioning holds the key to success during this stage, as you will need to gather plenty of information from the client in order to understand their situation, their expectations and their requirements.

Again, there's no silver-bullet solution when it comes to data collection and subsequent assessment, given how the information you need will differ enormously from one case and client to the next. Nevertheless, conducting a detailed and ongoing client assessment is important for the following reasons:

- Ñ It enables you to understand their issues in context
- Ñ It simplifies the process of developing treatment plans
- Ñ It helps you determine the extent to which you can help the client

- Ñ It facilitates workable and realistic goal setting
- Ñ It brings to light additional or alternative treatments that may be necessary

As for the logistics of the assessment process itself, this is where training and experience as a counsellor pays dividends. There is a serious amount of important information you need to collect in a relatively short period of time, including but not limited to the following:

#### *Personal Data*

Essential for both administrative purposes and as part of the initial probing process, involving the collection of:

- Ñ The basic personally identifying information of the client, including their full name, date of birth, telephone number, address and so on.
- Ñ It is also important to make a note of their employment status, occupation, gender, relationship status and (in some instances) their sexual orientation.

#### *The Client's Primary Issue*

When making a note of the problems the client presents, ensure they are noted exactly as they are presented by the client – never in terms of your own interpretations. This means taking account of:

- Ñ To what extent the problem is affecting their life and wellbeing?
- Ñ What feelings, thoughts and behaviours are associated with the issue?
- Ñ For how long has the client been struggling with the problem?
- Ñ Is it an issue that is worsening or remaining relatively consistent?

#### *The Lifestyle of the Client*

It is impossible to develop an understanding of a client's problems in context, without first considering the way they live their life in general. This means collecting information such as:

- Ñ What an average day looks like in their normal life
- Ñ Their preferred recreational activities and hobbies
- Ñ The extent to which they have an active social life
- Ñ Further information on their employment status
- Ñ A brief overview of their educational/academic history
- Ñ Anything particularly unique or interesting about their lifestyle

#### *Family History*

This is also essential for bringing context into the discussion, and (often) for drawing links between the issues being encountered and associated family issues. Data that should be collected includes:

- Ñ Basic information on the client's mother and father, including their ages, occupations, relationships with the client and a summary of their personalities
- Ñ Information on siblings on a similar level to the above

- Ñ General information on family relationships and the stability of the family unit, along with any issues that may have been faced in the past

### *Personal History*

This refers to any additional information regarding the personal history of the individual in question, which may prove helpful during future discussions. Examples of which include:

- Ñ Any history of illness, injury or medical issues in general
- Ñ A more detailed account of their academic and extracurricular background
- Ñ Brief summary of working history and professional activities to date
- Ñ The client's most important personal and professional objectives

### *A Basic Client Description*

This will largely be based on your own interpretations of the client, comprising observations such as the following:

- Ñ The immediate attitude of the client to the counselling process
- Ñ How open or otherwise the client is in conversation
- Ñ The extent to which any emotions are displayed
- Ñ How logical and rational (or otherwise) the client's remarks are
- Ñ Whether the client is warm, friendly, hostile, cold, closed etc.
- Ñ Additional observations on their body language
- Ñ Notes on posture, facial expressions, gestures and so on

### *Basic Summary*

The information you collect (in conjunction with your findings during initial discussions) should then put you in a position where you can create a basic summary and make a note of your initial recommendations. This will include:

- Ñ Any obvious connections between the information collected and the client's problem
- Ñ Whether you are qualified or otherwise to provide the support they need
- Ñ Indications that they may need referring to a different type of specialist
- Ñ The extent to which their objectives are realistic and should be pursued
- Ñ A vague estimate of how many counselling sessions you believe they will need

### **Investigating the Client's Issue In-Depth**

This is where the nature, extent and effects of the problem being experienced by the client are discussed in greater depth. It's not uncommon (quite the opposite) for a client to seek counselling for one specific issue, only for one or more equally important problems to be revealed during the sessions.

Context is important when discussing the client's issues, in order to understand how they are affecting their lives, why and to what extent. This means paying close attention to the following:

- Ñ The problem's association with feelings (embarrassment, fear, anxiety, anger etc.)
- Ñ The client's perceptions and beliefs (personal, religious, spiritual)
- Ñ Any connection between the problem and physical health complaints
- Ñ Interpersonal associations involving family, friends, spouses and so on

It's rare for these initial discussions to result in outright revelations, but it does happen sometimes. Or at least, the process of pinpointing the root cause of the issue (or combinations thereof) can be made considerably easier.

Additional questions to be asked and observations to be made during this stage of the process include the following:

Ñ *Can any pattern be noted with regard to the problem?*

- Does the problem occur at a specific time?
- Does it occur at a certain place?
- Does it tend to involve certain other people
- What factors make the problem better or worse?
- When and why has the problem temporarily disappeared in the past?
- What occurs before and after the problem?

Ñ *For how long has the problem been affecting the life of the client?*

- When does the client first remember experiencing the problem?
- How often does the client experience the problem?
- When the problem occurs, how long does it last?
- What effect does the problem have on their daily life?

Ñ *To what extent is the client coping with the problem?*

- What measures have they taken to cope with the problem?
- Which measures have worked, and which have failed?
- How do they believe the problem could be solved?
- How do they believe they would benefit by overcoming the problem?

All of the above is as much about intuition as it is following an investigative methodology you believed to be appropriate. If at any time you believe you've made a direct association between the client's problem and one or more factors in their life, it should be examined and discussed at length.

### **STAGE THREE: Setting Goals and Creating an Action Plan**

Goal setting is arguably the most important contributor to a successful counselling experience. This is not only where the client agrees to a set of clearly defined and achievable objectives, but also where they

commit to the action required to achieve them.

Setting goals means establishing exactly what the client expects to achieve by the time their programme of counselling comes to an end. It also means discussing much longer-term goals and their indefinite outlook in general. In all instances, goals are only considered viable if a clearly defined plan of action for their achievement can also be created.

A few of the primary benefits of setting goals as part of the counselling process being as follows:

- ✎ Clearly defined goals make it much easier for the client to build the motivation necessary to achieve them
- ✎ With goals identified and defined, the client and counsellor can develop a workable roadmap towards their eventual accomplishment
- ✎ Goal setting can also help the counsellor determine the extent of the help the client will require
- ✎ The identification of goals helps determine whether the outlook and objectives of the client are realistic and achievable
- ✎ Goals provide the client with a something of a framework that enables them to structure or restructure their life accordingly

Most importantly, identifying and agreeing on achievable objectives ensures that the client and the counsellor are on the same page, with regards to what they are seeking to achieve. Setting goals is also one of many ways in which the client formally acknowledges certain issues and shortfalls, which is an important part of the counselling process. As is pledging commitment to turning them around and building the motivation necessary to make it happen.

Though what's interesting is how despite its importance in the counselling process, not all counsellors are particularly skilled or capable when it comes to setting their *own* goals. This is why building a detailed knowledge of the goal-setting process is essential, if looking to build a successful career as a counsellor.

### **How to Identify and Define Goals**

Goals and objectives should never be vague, ambiguous, open to interpretation or generalised. They should be chosen carefully and defined with as much precision as possible, if they are to be achieved as planned. Use the following guidelines to improve your goal-setting skills, both for the benefit of yourself and the clients you work with:

- ✎ All goals should relate directly to the client's intended long-term outcome
- ✎ The goals you set should be measurable and trackable
- ✎ Goals should be considered in terms of feasibility and realism
- ✎ The goals you set should never go beyond your knowledge, skills and capabilities
- ✎ Your client's goals should come from them, rather than being forced upon them

As for the actual process of setting goals with clients, the following guidelines may prove helpful:

- ✎ Ensure the client understands the benefits of setting goals
- ✎ Present goal setting as a positive and constructive part of the process

- Ñ Explain that goals can be revisited and altered at a later date
- Ñ Discuss the potential risks and benefits of the goals set
- Ñ Discourage any goals or objectives that are unfeasible or unrealistic
- Ñ Never rush the goal-setting process – allow as much time as necessary
- Ñ Prioritise the goals you establish together with the client
- Ñ Make sure every goal is time-limited in some way
- Ñ Where goals are large or ambitious, break them down into smaller goals

Ultimately, setting goals is about establishing why it is that the client has sought counselling in the first place, and what they intend to achieve. Their vision of the 'end result' is technically their overriding objective, which in order to achieve will mean accomplishing any number of smaller milestones along the way.

These milestones are the goals that need to be set, which in all instances should be realistic, measurable and time limited. Setting realistic goals plays a major role in motivating clients, enabling them to appreciate and celebrate small victories along the way.

Goals that are excessively ambitious or unattainable simply set clients up for disappointment.

#### **STAGE FOUR: Counselling Intervention**

When a series of goals has been defined and agreed between the client and the counsellor, the time comes to decide on an appropriate intervention strategy. At this stage, there are several different intervention strategies the counsellor may recommend, which include:

- Ñ Individual counselling (suitable in most instances)
- Ñ Couples counselling
- Ñ Family counselling
- Ñ Group counselling

It is also here that the counsellor will choose an appropriate approach to counselling – be it a behavioural approach, a person-centred approach or any other approach they believe suitable for the case in question. In accordance with Kanfer and Busemeyer's six-stage model, the six stages of problem-solving in the field of counselling are problem detection, problem definition, identification of alternative solutions, decision making, execution, and verification

#### **STAGE FIVE: Evaluation, Termination or Referral**

As a counsellor, your primary goal is to render yourself and your services redundant or necessary. Though this may sound counterproductive, your objective is to help your clients reach a position when they no longer need your services.

Not because you have been unable to help them, but because you have helped them to the best of your capabilities and the time has come for them to move on. Every type of counselling takes place with the goal of successful termination, at which point the time comes to terminate the agreement or refer the client on to a different specialist.

As a counsellor, you have a responsibility of your clients to avoid fostering dependency and to empower those you work with. This is why it is important to begin the process of planning for termination towards the very beginning of the relationship. In addition, it's important to remember that termination (or onward referral) doesn't exclusively occur at the 'end' of the counselling process.

If at any point it becomes clear your services aren't proving helpful, it's your responsibility to terminate the relationship and refer your client on.

From the moment you meet, it is a good idea to ensure your client understands that counselling is only ever a finite process. Along with preparing them in advance for termination of the relationship, this will also help them envisage the proverbial 'light at the end of the tunnel' for additional motivation.

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Rounding off this module, we will now be taking a look at a series of frequently asked questions on the basics of counselling and the services provided by the counsellor. Please note that in all instances the answers provided are based largely on personal opinions, and may therefore vary in accordance with the counsellor consulted for their input.

### *Is a psychologist or psychiatrist the same as a counsellor?*

Though often consumed as one on the same, there are important differences between psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors. On one hand, it is true to say that they are all qualified professionals who help people solve issues and overcome obstacles in their lives. However, psychiatry and psychology often focus on longer-term psychological health problems, which may result in the recommendation of prescription medication. Counselling is much shorter-term in nature and aimed primarily at individuals who are otherwise within the 'normal range' in terms of psychological health.

### *Do I need to speak to a counsellor who specialises in my exact issue/field?*

The short answer is yes, for the simple reason that no counsellor can specialize in *all* aspects of counselling. If you are encountering problems with your spouse, you should consult with a knowledgeable and experienced marriage counsellor. If you are concerned about your gambling activities, you should make an appointment with an addiction counsellor. Just in the same way you wouldn't normally hire a carpenter to perform the work of an electrician, it's advisable to only ever work with a counsellor with relevant knowledge and experience.

### *Why attend counselling where I can talk to a caring friend or family member?*

There are two main reasons why consulting with a friend or family member isn't the same as meeting with a counsellor. First and foremost, you cannot rely on anyone who has an emotional connection with you to be 100% honest, impartial and objective. As the two of you already share a relationship, neither of you will be able to act with complete openness and impartiality. In addition, the individual you consult with is unlikely to have the same level of knowledge and experience as a professional counsellor. A good counsellor always knows what to say and when to say it – a friend or family member has no frame of reference. In addition, to consult with a friend or family member where serious issues are concerned risks straining relationships and

causing friction.

*Will the counsellor I consult with think I am stupid and overreacting?*

Absolutely not. The simple fact of the matter is that what one person may consider trivial, another may interpret as an enormous and life affecting problem. Each and every one of us interprets issues and obstacles in a different way, which is understood and appreciated by the counsellor. Just because you interpret or react to something in a different way to somebody else doesn't mean that either one of you is 'right' or 'wrong'. Counselling is about helping people get past their issues and obstacles – not assessing whether the issues are valid in the first place.

*How long does a course of counselling last?*

It's impossible to put an exact figure on the number of sessions any given client will need. Even after you've familiarised yourself with their issues and begun making progress, you need to be ready for further issues and setbacks that may occur at any time. Some counsellors may state that most of their clients achieve excellent progress within 10 to 20 sessions, but this is an extremely vague estimate at best.

*Is there a risk my counsellor will recommend psychiatric hospital admission?*

No, for the simple reason that your counsellor is not a psychiatrist. In any instance where a counsellor encounters an individual who could benefit from the support and advice of a qualified psychiatrist, they will be referred to one accordingly. Likewise, it is highly unlikely your counsellor will ever recommend a course of medication.

*What if I simply have a nervous breakdown during my session?*

Contrary to popular belief, this can actually be a good thing. A nervous breakdown (i.e. an outpouring of emotional upset, anger or turmoil) suggests that the individual in question has been 'bottling up' their true thoughts and feelings for some time. As the only way to make progress is to acknowledge, accept and confront these feelings, letting them all out in a counselling session can be extremely cathartic. If you cannot make your true feelings known in your everyday life, you may find it much easier to do so when consulting with a counsellor.

*Will my course of counselling be kept on filed and held against me?*

This cannot and will not happen for the simple reason that everything that happens in the counsellor's is 100% private and confidential. Under no circumstances (unless required to in accordance with a court order) will your counsellor share or reveal any of your private information or any aspect of your conversations with anyone else.

*Doesn't couples counselling simply create more resentment?*

If this was the case, couples counselling wouldn't exist. In reality, it exists because it can and often does address the kinds of issues that would otherwise result in separation. It can be surprisingly difficult to communicate openly and honestly with the most important people in your life. As previously mentioned, being honest and open with a counsellor is much easier. Once both partners have said their piece and got their feelings out in the open, it becomes a far easier to make positive progress.

*Isn't reading a book on my specific issue enough?*

Self-help books have the potential to be useful and, in some instances, can help people overcome their problems. Hence, they're the preferred initial choice for many, as an alternative to diving straight into counselling. However, the inherent issue with all self-help books is that they are an exclusively one-way communication medium. You cannot chat or share your opinions with a book (or the person who wrote it) in the same way you can with a counsellor. As the road to personal improvement is built almost entirely on communication, this is where the limitations of books and guides become apparent.

*What happens if I just ignore my problems and hope they go away?*

Best case scenario, you spend a period of time struggling in the same way you are now, and your problems eventually subside. Worst case scenario, things get gradually worse until a point when you simply cannot cope, and your issues takeover your life entirely. The most realistic scenario is actually somewhere down the middle, wherein your problems perpetuate and continue to take a toll on your life, your happiness, your wellbeing and your health. Seeking counselling at an early stage holds the key to swift and comparatively simple problem resolution. The longer you wait, the more complex and difficult the process becomes.

**Further Reading:**

- ✓ *Introduction to Counseling: Voices from the Field* by Jeffrey A. Kottler and David S. Shepard | Mar 4, 2014
- ✓ *Introduction to Counseling: An Art and Science Perspective* by Michael S. Nystul | Aug 13, 2015