



UNIT- 2

The Counselling Process

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ 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 2

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 worked 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 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 counsel 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:

- ✓ *The Essential Counselor: Process, Skills, and Techniques by David R. Hutchinson | Jun 5, 2014*
- ✓ *On Being a Client: Understanding the Process of Counselling and Psychotherapy by David Howe | Sep 22, 2014*