

COUNSELLING HANDBOOK

BY STAFF OF ACS DISTANCE EDUCATION



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CREDITS

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Written By:

Staff of ACS Distance Education

Photos:

John Mason and Stephen Mason

Layout & Illustration:

Stephen Mason

Editorial Assistants/Contributors:

Miriam ter Borg

Gavin Cole

Tracey Jones

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ACS Distance Education

P.O. Box 2092, Nerang MDC,
Queensland, Australia, 4211
admin@acs.edu.au
www.acsbookshop.com

P O Box 4171, Stourbridge, DY8 2WZ,
United Kingdom
admin@acsedu.co.uk
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As such, the publisher and author do not accept any liability for actions taken by the reader based upon their reading of this book.

CHAPTER 1: WHERE CAN COUNSELLING BE USED?

There are differences between formal counselling and the use of counselling skills.

A counsellor is a person who meets with a client on a professional basis to help to resolve their problems and issues. A counsellor will use counselling skills in their work.

Basically, we can say that counselling is –

A process where a counsellor and client meet up to discuss difficulties the client finds stressful or emotional. Through these helping sessions, the client is able to see their problem more clearly. This can enable them to focus on their feelings and experiences, which can help them to facilitate change. The client/counsellor relationship is a relationship based on trust and confidentiality.

Counselling is not –

- Being judgemental
- Giving advice
- Trying to solve problems for the client

However, many people will use counselling skills. This does not mean that they are counsellors.

As we said in the introduction, a professional counsellor fulfils a different role to someone using counselling skills or techniques.

To summarise:

- Formal counsellors will tend to base their counselling on a particular theory or theories.
- They will receive supervision at regular intervals during their counselling.
- They should abide by ethical guidelines and standards.
- They should have a formal contract with their clients.

Formal counselling is undertaken by a counsellor within a professional setting, but many different professionals use counselling skills e.g. psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists.

It is not just people involved in psychology who use counselling skills. Other people will use them, such as

- teachers
- social workers
- volunteers
- nurses
- doctors

But basically, anyone working with other people in a helping relationship.

This chapter will consider:

- What are counselling skills?
- Who uses them?

What Are Counselling Skills?

Counsellors use a wide range of counselling skills and techniques. These can also be used by other professionals within their daily role. Counselling skills fall into three main areas: attending skills, listening skills, and influencing skills. We will now consider important counselling skills.

Active Listening



Listening is an art that requires practice.

Many people will experience distressing or painful situations that they find hard to talk about. Active listening skills can encourage people to talk. Active listening helps people to talk through their problems by helping them to find a way to put into words what is troubling them. It may sound odd to consider

“active” listening. I am listening, what needs to be active about it? Think about how you listen. How often have you been having a conversation with someone where you have been listening to them talk but whilst you are listening, you are thinking about what you want to say next, planning what to eat for lunch, interrupting them and so on. This isn’t really listening or paying attention. You are not REALLY listening to what they have to say, but thinking about what you are thinking about. Active listening means that you are really paying attention. So what is active listening?

With active listening, you may do some talking, but mainly you are acting as a sounding board for the person to discuss their difficult issue. Active listening should just encourage the person to talk, not influence what they have to say.

Think about this, someone is telling you something distressing and you say:

“I know, I had the same experience when.....”

“I know how you feel.”

“Try not to worry about, it will get better soon.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad, last week, this happened to me.....”

All of these statements may be well-intentioned, but they could lead to the person stopping what they are saying, changing the subject or ending the conversation because they feel you don’t understand. With active listening this can be avoided. By listening actively you demonstrate to the person or client

that you are interested in what they have to say. It is one of the chief skills in building rapport and trust in a client-counsellor relationship. Active listening is part of the repertoire of listening and attending skills a trained counsellor uses to help client's to discuss their issues. The following skills are all part of the listening techniques.

Open Questions

Open questions are those that are likely to receive a longer answer. They give the respondent time to think and reflect, to give their opinions and feelings. They give control of the conversation to the respondent. They are useful to find out more about the person, what their problems are and so on.

The use of open questions is one method of active listening. Try to use questions that do not require a yes or no answer. This encourages the person you are speaking to, to open up more. So rather than say "Does this really bother you?" you could try "This sounds like it really bothers you. Tell me why?" The first question could be answered "yes" or "no" and that could be the end of the question. The second question requires the person to speak more, to expand on why the situation bothers them. This encourages the person to keep talking. So, if you want to encourage the client to talk more freely you should avoid questions like "Are you okay?" or "Does that help?" or "Do you want to talk more about this?" as this can shut down a conversation. Try instead to use questions like:

- Do you want to tell me more about how you feel?

- What would help you now?
- Can you tell me more about this?
- How did you feel when that happened?

Active listening and using open questions does not just have to be part of a helping relationship. It can also be part of our day to day conversation.

All of these questions encourage conversation. They encourage the person to express their feelings, say how they feel. If you are not experienced in counselling skills, you may find this a little awkward at first. It may be artificial, but the more you do this the easier it becomes. Try asking open questions in your general conversation. You will be amazed at how much more people will open up, when it looks like you are really interested in what THEY have to say. It doesn't just have to be when someone has a problem. You can also use open questions and active listening when people are talking to you about anything.

Often, open questions begin with the words: *can, could, why, how* or *what*.

Closed Questions

Closed questions are questions that can be answered by a single word or short phrase. How old are you? Where do you live? They can often be answered by yes or no. Closed questions are useful in some ways -

- They give us facts.
- They are easy for the person to answer.

- They are quick to answer.
- They keep the control of the conversation with the person answering the question.

Closed questions do sometimes have their place. Sometimes you want a person to make a definite decision or choice. So closed questions can be used to clarify something. For example, “So let me see if I’ve got this right, you are annoyed with your boss because he wouldn’t let you have last Friday off?” The client can then answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ This tells you that you are on the right track, you have understood what the person is saying. This also tells the person you are listening to that you have understood as well.

As we said above, open questions allow conversations to flow more freely and encourage conversation and debate, so are more useful in exploring client issues. But closed questions are more useful for obtaining brief factual information. They are also useful for bringing focus to an interview situation, though the onus is on the counsellor to guide the interview.

Often, closed questions begin with the words: *do*, *is* or *are*.

Whether asking open or closed questions, they should not be overused. Too many questions may make a client feel as though they are being interrogated. Alternatively, they may feel overcome with anger or guilt. Also, the guiding nature of questions may be too authoritarian for some. Indeed for some non-Western cultures questions are deemed inappropriate.

Paraphrasing

Another element of active listening is paraphrasing. It is a way that the counsellor can say back to the client what they have heard using some of the client’s own words. It is not merely repeating back parrot-fashion what the client has said, rather it is an abbreviation of the client’s statements using several of the client’s key words along with a few of the counsellor’s own words.

For example, a client might say: “I’ve had a terrible week - my car broke down, my cat has run away, I’ve got a cold, work is stressful, and my neighbour is pissing me off.”

To paraphrase, the counsellor might say: “You’ve had a terrible week because lots of things have gone wrong.”

Again, paraphrasing demonstrates to the client that they have been heard and understood. Done properly, a paraphrase will stop the client from feeling that they have to keep repeating the same information and can go on to discuss and explore other issues.

Clarifying/Encouraging

Sometimes we want to avoid difficult things. We can avoid saying them. A person you are speaking to might do this. They may avoid saying something, but their body language tells you it is a difficult thing. So you can use statements such as:

“This sounds like it is a difficult thing for you?”

“Tell me more about

Then encouraging them more with statements, such as “Go on”, “Tell me more”, or “Yes.” This may sound obvious, but it is so easy to forget to make these sorts of comments when we are thinking about our issues and what we have to say next.

One way of clarifying is to repeat keywords used by the client. The key word selected will influence the direction of the interview.

Another method is to restate certain parts of what the client has said through the use of short statements. These restatements can again influence the direction of the interview like minimal encouragers.

Minimal Encouragers

Another way to show that you are listening is by using minimal encouragers. Minimal encouragers help to put the speaker at ease, and encourage them to continue talking with minimal interruption or influence. You probably use minimal encouragers subconsciously in your conversations already. Some examples include “mmm hmmm”, “uh-huh”, “I see”, “tell me more”, or nodding your head. Even a silence accompanied by appropriate body language can serve as a minimal encourager.

Counselling skills can sound quite simple. I am sure many of you reading this will think, I do that all the time. The next few times you have a conversation with someone, try to use these different skills and techniques. Consider if you

DO actually use them.

Minimal Encouragers should be used with care though. Too many mmms or nods can make the person think that you are not really listening or are bored.

Silence

Silence is also a good way to encourage people to open up. Many people are brought up to find silence uncomfortable or awkward. So when there is a silence they will rush to fill it with the first thing that comes into their mind. This is often helpful as it tells us more about what the person is thinking.

The silence can feel uncomfortable for the person using counselling skills and the person they are helping. If you can start to use silence in an effective way, though, it can help open up communication. The person helping should listen to the silences as well as the words. Silences can help. The helper can use the silence to –

- Encourage the person to think more about their situation.
- Encourage the client to carry on the burden of the conversation (so talking more about how they feel).
- As a way for the helper to organise their own thoughts.
- As a natural ending to a discussion.

The person being help can use silences to –

- Think about what they want to say

- Allow their feelings to develop
- Recover from emotions
- Encourage a response from the helper
- As a way to collect their thoughts and reflect on feelings.

Silence can be uncomfortable, but it does show that you are listening. If the person is talking and taking time to think what they want to say next, you might normally rush in with a comment. But if you are silent, the person realises that you are really listening and waiting for what they have to say next. That you are interested in what they have to say. So when a person is talking about something difficult for them, silence, nods and maintaining eye contact can show attention and interest.

Summarising

Summarising is another technique used in active listening. It shows that you have listened to the person and understood what they have said. An example might be:

“So you love your job, but you don’t like your new boss, so you are not sure whether to find another job.” This just briefly summarises the main points of what the person has said.

Although similar to paraphrasing and encouraging, summarising is used to sum up a longer period of the interview. It is used to check that the counsellor has understood the gist of a whole section of an interview, or even to review an entire session or several

sessions. It is best done with a check at the end to see if what the client has portrayed through thoughts and feelings has been correctly understood. For example, you might ask “Does that sound about right?”, “Have I understood you?”, or “Does that sound like a fair summary?”

Reacting

You are listening to a person talking. They are telling you about how difficult things have been for them. They don’t want you to sit/stand there and be totally neutral, so it is important to show sympathy and understanding without cutting short the conversation. Statements such as “You sound like you’ve had a terrible time” or “That must have been so difficult for you” show that you are being understanding of how difficult it has been for them.

Reflecting

Another technique that can be used is reflecting. There are two types of reflection used by counsellors:

1. Reflection of feeling
2. Reflection of meaning

Reflection of feeling is considered part of the listening sequence. It involves repeating a word or phrase back to the person to encourage them to talk. For example, if the person says “I’ve been really stressed lately”. You can repeat back to them – “So you’ve been stressed lately?” This is different to paraphrasing which focuses on reflecting back content. Instead, the