

# LESSON 1 WHAT IS COUNSELLING?

*Many people experience difficulties in their lives, when their problems seem overwhelming and distressing. They may not be able to talk to the people close to them about their problems, so will seek help from a counsellor. They may have issues such as relationship breakdowns, divorce, bereavement, illness, family crisis and so on. They may find it hard to cope or not have the personal resources to deal with a problem. The counsellor will help the person to retain their independence, develop coping strategies, and encourage them to act on their own choices to resolve their problems.*

Counselling is not a quick fix. We do not go to a counsellor to get “the answer” or for the counsellor to tell us what to do to feel better. Counselling is not a get well soon option, but rather a way to encourage the person to consider their issues and explore them and hopefully resolve them.

Counselling is a working relationship. The counsellor’s role is to help the client manage what is happening in their life and explore it further. It is a form of talk therapy or psychological therapy that offers people the chance to change how they live and feel. The aim of counselling is to provide the person with a more satisfying experience of their life. Everyone is different and unique, so counselling should be concerned with offering support to the person as an individual.

The counsellor helps facilitate the client’s resolution of their difficulties and issues. As such, they must also respect the person’s culture, choice, values and personal resources. Counselling can provide a person with a space to talk about their problems and personal feelings in a confidential and dependable environment.

The counsellor may offer the person the only situation where they can truly reveal how they feel about their difficulties and their life, so the counselling relationship is a very important one.

Counsellors do not give advice, but offer insight into the client’s feelings and behaviour. When necessary, they may also help the client to change their behaviour. They will do this by listening to what the client has to say and then commenting on this from a professional perspective. Counselling covers people who may use counselling skills as part of their job role (nurses and teachers for example) or other, specifically trained counsellors.

Many people use counselling skills in their daily lives. However, sometimes it may be inappropriate for people to use their usual methods of support. They may not want to discuss their problems with a friend or family member. They may feel that the person is too close, that they don’t want them to know their confidential problems or the person they would usually confide in might be part of the problem. Counsellors are trained to be effective helpers in difficult

## Suggested Tasks: ▼

*Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.*

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### Suggested Tasks

People may require counselling for many different reasons. Make a list of reasons why a person may seek help from a counsellor. If you are unsure, look online for counsellors and research the services they offer.

## COUNSELLING TECHNIQUES – A SUMMARY

There are several basic counselling skills that are important in telephone, online and face-to-face situations. Later in the course, we will consider in more detail how these skills are specifically used in telephone and online counselling situations.

### Attending

In tradition counselling, attending behaviour shows the client that you are present both physically and psychologically and that you are listening. It also shows empathy. Empathy is the ability to put yourself into someone else's shoes. It comes from the Greek words for "in feeling" – empathising with someone is feeling with someone. This is distinct from sympathy. Sympathy is feeling for someone, perhaps feeling sorry for someone. When we display empathy, we actually try to visualise how that person might feel about what is going on in their life.

Attending behaviour is demonstrated by the SOLER method. This is a method of actively listening to the people. It can be a very effective way of listening to people in a counselling situation, but also in conversation generally. It shows that we are paying attention to the speaker, that we are attending to them.

Developed by Gerald Egan, in his book, *The Skilled Helper*, this acronym details the essential parts of communication:

or sensitive situations. They should be independent, neutral and professional, and always respect the client's privacy. Counselling can help people clarify problems, identify changes they would like to make, get a fresh perspective, consider alternative options, and reflect on the impact that life events have made on their emotional wellbeing.

Counselling can help people to come to terms with their issues and difficulties. It works best if the person comes to counselling through their own choice and is committed to the counselling process and want to change. Counselling is not about making judgements.

There are five key elements that must exist for counselling to work:

- A contract between the counsellor and client.
- A warm and trusting, professional relationship.
- Client-focussed work.
- A space where the client feels safe.
- A place where the client is able to share difficult feelings in an accepting atmosphere.

When we talk about a safe space, we're not talking about a physical space, but rather a place where the person feels safe. This may sound odd when we are looking at telephone and online counselling, but a safe space can also be a virtual/online space, a time and situation where the person is offered support and acceptance to talk about their problems.

- S – S stands for sitting squarely. This means you sit and face the person that you are speaking with. We should sit attentively at an angle to the person, so we can look at them directly and show that we are listening to them and paying attention to them.
- O – O stands for having an open posture. Do not cross your arms as this can make us appear anxious or defensive.
- L – Lean forwards to show we are interested in what the person is talking about. It also means that the person can lower their voice if they wish to, if they are talking about personal issues, for example.
- E – E stands for eye contact. Maintaining eye contact again shows we are interested and listening to what the person has to say. It doesn't mean stare at the person as this can make them feel uncomfortable, but maintain good, positive eye contact.
- R – R stands for relaxed body language. This shows the person that you are not in a rush to get away, but are letting them talk at their own pace, which demonstrates interest.

When listening to people, it is important to show your interest. Active listening is not just listening and hearing, it is also developing an interaction with the person we are listening to.

## Active Listening

Active listening is also important in the counselling process, whether it is face-to-face, online or by telephone. It shows that we are really hearing what a person is saying.

In a day to day conversation, we may not give other people our full attention. In a counselling situation, it is important we fully listen to our clients.

Listening has several aspects:

- Linguistic – the actual words, phrases and metaphors we use to convey how we feel.
- Paralinguistic – our tone, accent, pitch, timing and volume.
- Non-verbal – our body language, facial expression, posture, movement, touch and so on.

## Preventing Inauthentic Listening

As soon as a skill becomes second nature it is not uncommon for the skill to be taken for granted and depending on how we may be feeling at any particular time, for the skill to be demonstrated ineffectively (when we may be too tired or have other concerns on our mind). In order to prevent this from happening, it will serve you to keep in mind the following:

- Don't fake understanding (if you don't understand, keep trying your reflecting practice until you do).
- Don't tell the speaker you know how they feel (saying "I know how you feel", when someone has had

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### Suggested Tasks

Think back to the last conversation you had with someone. Were you really listening to what they had to say? When they were talking, what were you thinking about? What you were going to say next? What you were going to eat for lunch? How much work you had to do? What they were wearing? What the person behind you was saying? Were you really paying attention to what they were saying?

a lousy day, merely puts the focus back on you, and really you can never understand exactly how another feels BUT you can relate to it, which is entirely different).

- Try not to respond the same way every time.
- Remember to identify the feelings and to reflect them (don't automatically revert back to remaining in the intellect, especially when you are speaking with someone who shies away from their feelings).
- Vary your vocal quality. Be warm and emphasise feeling words that the client expresses (try not to remain always calmly spoken, or excited).
- Refrain from giving advice.
- Remain focused and relevant.

## Asking questions

How we ask questions is particularly important in the counselling situation.

If we ask "Are you okay today?" A client may respond with Yes/No.

If we say "Tell me how you are feeling today," the client is required to give a more detailed response. "Well, I'm not too happy today....." and so on.

The first question is an example of a closed question. The second is an open question. Both types of question can be used in counselling, but open questions encourage a person to open up and talk

to us more.

Here are a few examples of good open questions might include –

- Why is that important to you?
- How do you feel when she says that sort of thing to you?
- Tell me more about your family when you were growing up.
- How did you feel when that happened?
- What are your reasons for saying that?

Why do we use open ended questions?

- To begin a conversation.
- To encourage the person we are speaking with to elaborate.
- To motivate a person to communicate.

Why do we use closed questions?

- To get a simple yes or no response.
- To obtain specific information.
- To narrow the topic of discussion.
- To interrupt a client. This may sound odd, but there are times when a client will not stop talking, but is going round and round in circles and not really reaching a meaningful or helpful conclusion. This can be a technique that they are using to defend themselves from psychological harm, and is often

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### Suggested Tasks

Think of some open and closed questions you might use in a counselling situation. Try to think of more open questions as these encourage the client to open up more.

unconscious. A simple question can help to break that cycle and encourage the client to focus on the issues at hand.

An example –

Client – “I don’t have anyone to talk to.”

Counsellor – “No one at all?”

Client – “I’m just a failure. I’ve never had any friends.”

Counsellor – “Never.”

This encourages the client to really think about what they are saying. If a person is particularly stressed or depressed, they can think negatively. Everything about their life feels wrong. So this type of comment will help the person to look at that. Is it really true that they have never had any friends? Is it true that they have no one to talk to?

## Reflection

Reflection is another counselling technique. In reflection, we echo the last few words a person has spoken.

Client – “In the last year, my husband lost his job. My friend got cancer. I am waiting for an operation. It has been a horrible year.”

Counselling – “So it has been a horrible year?”

Or

Client – “My husband got a new job in London. I had to give up work to go and live there. I don’t mind, but I’m finding it hard to get a job.”

Counsellor – “You are finding it hard to get a job...”

This encourages the client to focus on what they were just saying. It also ensures that both the counsellor and client know that they have the same understanding of the issues at hand.

## Challenging

Challenging is another technique. It should be used with care as challenging can feel like confrontation or criticism. Often challenging is only used when the client and counsellor have developed a good trusting relationship.

## Paraphrasing

The counsellor will rephrase what the client has said.

Client – “All I do is sit around the house all day, sleeping or eating. I know I shouldn’t, that I should get out, but I don’t.”

Counsellor – “It sounds to me that you know you shouldn’t stay in all the time, that you need to get out.”

Paraphrasing ensures the client and counsellor are both on the same page, that both understand what the client is saying. It also helps both parties ensure they are understanding one another. If the counsellor misunderstands, the client has an opportunity to tell the counsellor what the problem really is. Paraphrasing can also help the client to focus on what the problem actually is.