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1 What are counselling skills?

The first thing we did as we sat down in front of our computers to write this book was to think about life as it is today. For a while, instead of writing, we chatted about common values that seem to be fashionable and respected. We thought about the way that today many people place a high value on independence and self-sufficiency. We ourselves are people who value our independence and pride ourselves on being self-sufficient. We work for ourselves in our own counselling practice and as writers and trainers. Even so, we recognise that at times we need to seek each other's or someone else's help. We think that it is sensible for us to value our boundaries and to generally be independent, but to be flexible enough to look for and/or accept help when we need it.

How do you see yourself? Do you see yourself primarily as someone who is independent and self-sufficient? If so, are you someone who lives a fairly solitary life, or someone who is actively part of an extended family, social system, or wider community? We are all different; some of us choose to be very independent and self-sufficient whereas others value a more cooperative lifestyle.

Because there is currently a strong emphasis on self-sufficiency some people believe that everyone should look after their own needs without help from others. If we accept this point of view we won't seek help ourselves, or give help to other people. Sadly, such an attitude is likely to result in an uncaring society where everyone puts self-interest above the needs of others. We do need to recognise though that such an attitude is understandable. Some people live such pressured lives that they do not have the energy to care for others while at the same time looking after their own needs. Fortunately, in spite of the fast pace of modern life, there are many people who are prepared, and able, to give something of themselves in order to help others.

One of the most useful ways in which we can help other people is to listen and communicate with them in ways that enable them to share their troubles and feel better. In this book we will describe a number of listening, communication and helping skills. These skills are basic counselling skills that are used, along with other skills and strategies, by volunteer and professional counsellors when counselling people who have specifically sought counselling help.

The counselling skills that we will discuss in this book are extremely useful ones because they are generally applicable, not just in a counselling situation, but in a wide range of life situations. It is therefore exciting for us to write this book and to be able to share with you our ideas about how to use these skills in everyday life. As we write, we both remember what it was like for us when we first learnt to make use of counselling skills. At that time we had many questions about whether it was appropriate for us to be learning to help other people in this way. Because we are human, we had our own problems and therefore found ourselves asking the question, 'What kind of people use counselling skills; are they limited to use by counsellors or can some of these skills be used in everyday life?'

One of the most useful ways of helping other people is to be effective in listening and communicating with them

WHO CAN USE COUNSELLING SKILLS?

Because you are reading this book, we assume that you would like to learn some counselling skills that are suitable for use in everyday life. As we sit here writing we find ourselves wondering who you, the reader, are. Are you a person who works at home looking after yourself or your family; are you someone who is a member of a religious organisation; do you work in an office or a factory; are you a tradesman or a professional, a medical practitioner, a nursing sister, a child care worker, an accountant,

solicitor, or teacher? Maybe you are the president of your social club, or sports club, or run a youth group. Alternatively, you may be a quiet, retiring person who fades into the background socially and never takes a leadership role.

You might want to take a moment to think about who you are, and to think about three things that you like about yourself.

Three things I like about myself are:

1.
2.
3.

We suggested that you write down three things you like about yourself because if you like yourself you probably feel good about who you are. If you feel good about yourself you are in a position to help other people feel good about themselves. We would like to make it clear that it doesn't matter who you are, what your lifestyle is, or what you do for a living. The counselling skills we will describe can be used by people from all walks of life and in a wide variety of situations.

Do you have personal problems of your own? It is quite possible that you do. We have come to the conclusion that there are very few people, if any, who do not have problems of some sort. Don't despair; having problems does not preclude you from helping others. However, we would like to give you a word of caution. If you decide to make use of counselling skills it is likely that other people will share some of their problems and troubling thoughts with you. Listening to other people's problems can be emotionally draining. This will be particularly so if you yourself have problems that continually intrude into your life. If you do, your problems may seriously interfere with your ability to be effective in helping others. Additionally, you might become overwhelmed by being burdened with other people's problems as well as your own. Clearly, the impact on you if you use counselling skills is an important consideration so we will explore this more fully later. Of course there may also be benefits for you if you learn to use coun-

selling skills effectively as not only will you have the satisfaction of helping other people, but also your relationships may improve.

Helping others deal with day-to-day problems isn't an activity that is restricted to highly qualified professionals. On the contrary, it's an activity that most people do from time to time when the need arises. It is an activity which occurs naturally and which we all learn from childhood onwards. I am sure that you can remember a time when you listened to someone who was distressed and helped them feel better.

We hope that by reading this book you will be able to develop skills which will enhance your current ability to listen and help others, either in a social setting or in a work environment. We think that this book should be particularly useful to anyone who works directly with people, regardless of the nature or context of their work. For example, we believe that it will be helpful for those who work within health and social care settings, advice and welfare agencies, youth programmes, the legal services, housing services, charitable and voluntary organisations, emergency services, and for religious or spiritual leaders, teachers, informal carers, and other interested people.

Have you noticed that some people have a natural talent for listening to other people and helping them to sort out their problems? If you have a natural talent you will probably find that people seem to seek you out when they have something on their mind that is bothering them. Quite clearly, we all have different levels of competence and success in our ability to join with and listen to other people, but we believe that by learning some specific skills we can be more effective in helping others.

Do you think that you have a high level of naturally acquired counselling skills? You may have. Whether you have or not, our hope is that by reading this book you will be able to discover ways to be more effective when using counselling skills and will also gain a better understanding of the processes which occur when these skills are used.

IF I USE COUNSELLING SKILLS WILL I BE A COUNSELLOR?

The short answer to this question is 'No'. It is important to be clear about the difference between making use of some basic counselling skills in everyday life and counselling. They are not the same, although they lie on the same continuum (see Chapter 10). So that you can understand the difference between counselling and using counselling skills in everyday life we will discuss:

- Counselling
- The use of counselling skills.

Counselling is significantly different from using counselling skills in everyday life

Counselling

Although this book is intended to help readers learn some basic counselling skills for use in everyday life it is not intended to help readers become counsellors. Even so, we realise that it is possible that some readers may become so enthused by the success that they have in using the skills we describe that they may decide to undertake training to become counsellors.

Anyone wanting to become a counsellor needs to attend an accredited course of study accompanied and followed by practical training and supervision. A counsellor needs to have an understanding of psychology and human developmental processes, understand counselling theory and a range of theoretical approaches. Additionally, a counsellor needs to work within a specific theoretical framework which either encompasses one model of practice or uses an integrative model of practice drawing on elements from a number of theoretical approaches. Counsellors use a range of skills and strategies appropriate for their model of practice.

Many counsellors work in a structured setting where people who are seeking counselling attend counselling sessions at specified times. Although other counsellors are more informal they usually have the expectation that the client will come to them to seek help.

Counselling is practised according to a set of standards and guidelines determined by professional bodies that set minimum accreditation standards and levels of competence. Counsellors are bound by codes of practice, which emphasise the counsellor's respect for the client's values, experience, thoughts, feelings and their capacity for self-determination. They aim to serve the best interests of a client (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) *Guidelines for those Using Counselling Skills in their Work*, 1999). Additionally, counsellors are bound by ethical standards which stress the importance of boundaries in the relationship, particular qualities of the relationship and the specific goals of the counselling activity.

Boundaries in a counselling relationship

Counselling generally takes place in an environment where privacy can be ensured, and which provides for the physical and emotional safety of both the person being counselled and the counsellor. Information about the nature and purpose of the counselling relationship is clarified with the person being counselled, and rules relating to ethical boundaries are observed. For example, it is not acceptable for a counsellor to have affectionate physical contact with a client either during a counselling session or afterwards. Similarly, it is not appropriate for counsellors to make contact for their own personal reasons with people being counselled.

Qualities of a counselling relationship

The qualities of a relationship with a counsellor are different from the qualities of other kinds of relationship where counselling skills may be used in everyday life situations of either a social or work-related nature.

You might ask, 'What is different about the relationship between a counsellor and person being counselled and other relationships where counselling skills are used?' Perhaps the most important difference is that there is an unequal quality in the counsellor/other person relationship. Counsellors put their own needs to one side and focus only on the needs of the other person. Of course, a friend or colleague can do this for while, but normally they will stay in touch with their own needs as well as the other person's needs. By contrast, a counsellor will usually put their own needs to one side while attending to the other person for the whole duration of the counselling session. A counsellor listens and focuses exclusively on the other person and their problems and does not intrude on the counselling process by talking about their own issues. This is obviously very different from a normal conversation between friends and workmates.

A counselling relationship does not include the normal reciprocal qualities of friendship. Counselling is a one-way process where the counsellor invites the other person to share their thoughts, feelings, experiences and problems, and the counsellor does little sharing except where this is for the direct benefit of the person being counselled. In contrast, friends share experiences mutually and this strengthens the bond between them.

A counselling relationship is most definitely not an authoritarian one. Counsellors strive to create an equal relationship with the people they are helping. This is very different from the relationship between supervisors and their staff in a work situation. In the work situation it is appropriate for a supervisor to give instructions, direction, and guidance to their staff so that company or agency policies are implemented and necessary goals and tasks are achieved. In this situation the relationship is certainly not an equal one, but it is still possible for the people involved to use counselling skills when appropriate.

Whereas people often try to persuade their friends to do the sort of things that they might do themselves, or to do things which they think are best, a counsellor behaves quite differently. A counsellor is somebody who encourages other people to do what they themselves want to do, instead of encouraging them to do what the

counsellor thinks is best for them. This means that generally counsellors do not give advice.

Counsellors usually do not give advice or make suggestions about how to resolve problems from an expert point of view. Instead, they encourage the person being counselled to discover their own resources and solutions. By contrast, within a friendship, workmate, or supervisory relationship, even when counselling skills are being used, offering suggestions to the person in distress or difficulty may be useful, sensible, and appropriate.

Goals of counselling

Counselling usually involves helping people to address specific problems that are troubling them. Additionally, it often involves helping a person to develop different and more positive ways of coping with life. People seek counselling for a very wide range of purposes. Examples include: being emotionally distressed because of the loss of a loved one, feeling depressed and lonely, having relationship problems, suffering from stress, anxiety, and experiencing troubling thoughts as a result of past experiences. Often counselling will help people to develop skills and experience personal growth. Thus, resolving troubling issues or developing strengths to cope with life are common goals of counselling.

Counselling is practised according to a set of standards and guidelines set by an appropriate professional body and in accordance with a code of practice which emphasises respect for the client's values, experience, thoughts, feelings and capacity for self-determination

The use of counselling skills

You don't need to be a counsellor to use the counselling skills that we will describe. These skills are certainly not limited to use by counsellors in counselling sessions. They are valuable communi-

cation skills which can be very effective in helping others when used in everyday conversation by people who are not counsellors.

Whenever a person is emotionally troubled, confused, having difficulty making a decision or solving a problem, the use of counselling skills can be helpful. For example, a neighbour might use counselling skills with the person next door who has recently separated from their partner. A medical practitioner might use counselling skills while treating a patient for injuries sustained during physical conflict with another person. An office worker might use counselling skills to help a colleague who is having trouble managing their workload. A teacher might use counselling skills to help a student talk about problems in studying.

Will the use of counselling skills change the relationship?

Everyday relationships are not the same as counsellor–client relationships and it is not appropriate for them to be the same.

Being a friend: If you have a friendship with someone they are unlikely to be appreciative if you try to behave as though you were their counsellor. Friendship is about mutuality, where each person shares equally in a relationship which is open and supportive. Your friend is likely to be appreciative though, if, when troubled, you can make it easier for them to talk to you about the things that are troubling them by using interpersonal skills such as listening and attending skills and other communication skills which will make it more comfortable for them to talk. In this process, unlike the counsellor, you will not be restrained by the counsellor's formal ethical boundaries and one-way relationship but instead can enjoy a normal friendship relationship. Thus, you will be free to talk about similar experiences you might have had and to share your own troubles with your friend. Depending on the sort of relationship you have, you may decide to put your arm round your friend or give them a hug in order to reassure or comfort them.

Being a manager: If you are a manager, your role naturally involves making decisions that affect others and having a level

of authority. Consequently, you cannot have the relationship that a counsellor has with their client. There will also be limits to the level of self-disclosure, which can appropriately be expected from a member of your staff. Even so, by using counselling skills appropriately you may be able to help a member of your staff to talk to you about problems that are troubling them, to help them make sensible decisions, and feel better. While doing this you need to recognise that your relationship is still a management one. It would not be appropriate to change role, but within the context of your role you can use counselling skills to make it easier for the other person to talk about those things that trouble them.

Being a nurse: If you are a nurse you will have a professional relationship with your patient which requires you to carry out particular medical procedures. While maintaining that relationship, which is quite different from a counsellor–client relationship, you may be able to help your patient feel better emotionally by using counselling skills.

You may notice in the examples we have given that the primary nature of the relationship between the person using counselling skills and the other person is substantially unchanged by the use of these skills. The friend relates as a friend, the manager relates as a manager, and the nurse relates as a nurse. It would be neither sensible nor appropriate to try to alter or disregard the nature of the primary relationship. However, although this relationship is substantially unchanged, in our experience, when people in any profession or social situation use counselling skills sensibly and appropriately, the relationship is enhanced.

Unlike the counselling situation, where direct advice is rarely given, counselling skills will sometimes be used in a context where it is both appropriate and necessary to provide information and/or give direct advice. Giving advice may at times help the person to solve problems and make decisions. This is particularly so where the person using counselling skills has knowledge or experience which the other person doesn't have. For example, a mother may use counselling skills while listening to her teenage daughter as she talks about a difficult relationship with her best girlfriend. The mother's primary role is as a parent, so, depending on the circum-

stances, it might be appropriate for her to make suggestions and/or give advice. Similarly a work supervisor may use counselling skills when addressing issues of punctuality with an employee who has recently returned to work following the birth of a new baby, and at the same time offer the employee advice based on current information about the company's policies regarding punctuality.

Whenever we use **counselling skills** we need to recognise that we are intentionally communicating in a way that is different from general conversational dialogue

WHAT CAN WE ACHIEVE BY USING COUNSELLING SKILLS?

We wonder what ideas come into your mind when you ask yourself the question, 'What can we achieve by using counselling skills?' Would you like to stop and think about what you would like to achieve by using counselling skills? If so, we suggest that you complete the following:

I would like to use counselling skills to help people to:

1.
2.
3.
4.

We think that counselling skills can be used to comfort people in distress, and to help people with problems to:

- deal with their emotions so that they feel better
- deal with worrying thoughts and beliefs
- find solutions to problems
- make decisions

- feel more positive about themselves
- examine and maybe change their behaviours with regard to relationships with others.

Can you think back to a time when someone helped you by listening to you so that you could deal with troubling emotions or solve a difficult problem? If you can, then you are remembering an experience where someone probably, either deliberately or without realising what they were doing, used counselling skills to help you.

- What was that experience like?
- What were the most significant things that you still remember about that experience?
- Can you remember what it was like for you?
- Can you remember what that person did to help?

Our guess is that it might be easier for you to remember how you felt as a result of the experience, than for you to remember what the helper actually said or did. If the person used counselling skills it is quite possible that you hardly noticed what they were saying.

Although helping others using our communication skills is something that we learn to do throughout life and which we all do naturally, we can be more effective if we make use of some basic counselling skills.

CHOOSING WHEN, AND WHEN NOT, TO USE COUNSELLING SKILLS

Once you have improved your natural counselling skills you will be able to decide when to use them. For example, when relating to a friend you might playfully collude on a plan to encourage your partners to spend an evening out together or commiserate about the difficulties of raising teenage children. At other times you might decide that it is more important for you to focus on your friend's problems by using counselling skills for a while. If you do decide to make use of counselling skills, remember that you are still a friend, but you are choosing for a while to use particular communication skills to help your friend.

The decision about whether or not to use counselling skills in a conversation is an important one, which is best illustrated by use of an example.

David and the neighbour

Last week David met one of our neighbours, Julie. We have a friendly relationship with Julie and often have chats with her about the weather, friends, relatives, and things we are doing. However, last week as she started to talk about her son and daughter-in-law, David realised that she was becoming emotionally troubled. David then had to decide whether or not to use counselling skills to help her to feel better. In making this decision he had to take account of his relationship with Julie, the time available, the situation, and his own emotional energy.

David might have been in a hurry, might have realised that the situation was very public, or might have recognised that at that point in time he did not have the emotional resources to listen to someone else's problems. In taking into account any of these factors he might have decided that it was not appropriate to use counselling skills at that time. In this case, he might have said, 'I'm really sorry to hear that your son and daughter-in-law have problems. Young people often seem to find their relationships difficult in the early stages. I hope things will soon improve for them.' That would have been an appropriate, caring and friendly response. However, it would not have been a response that utilised counselling skills, because instead of inviting our neighbour to talk about how she felt, it would have effectively ignored her feelings, and closed the conversation on the subject by expressing the hope that things would improve.

As it happened, David didn't give this response, but instead chose to use counselling skills to help our neighbour express her emotions about the subject and to subsequently feel better as a result. By using counselling skills Julie was invited to talk in more detail about her worries. As a consequence, she talked at some length about her concerns and dealt with these in a way that seemed to be good for her.

It is important to recognise that by using counselling skills you will be either directly or indirectly giving the other person an invitation to talk to you about personal information. Thus, they may disclose information to you that is private and that they would prefer to be kept confidential. Therefore, when we use counselling skills we need to be sensitive to the other person's needs in this regard.

Whether or not you decide to use counselling skills will depend on several factors. It might be useful if you took a moment or two to think about the things that could influence your decision about whether or not to use them.

We think that the following questions are relevant:

- Can I provide a trusting relationship?
- Is the environment suitably private?
- Will I be able in my social or professional role to provide the required level of confidentiality?
- Am I feeling emotionally robust enough to listen to someone else's problems?
- Am I clear about my expectations regarding my relationship with the person and possible outcomes which may result from the conversation?
- Do I feel competent in inviting the person to discuss the problem in question?

Now that you have read this list you will probably realise that when we use counselling skills we have a moral obligation toward the person we are trying to help. If they choose to talk to us about sensitive and private issues we need to respect their confidentiality and make sure that other people can't overhear. The person we are talking with needs to be confident that they can trust us not to misuse the information they give us. These issues will be more fully discussed in Chapter 3.

In our previous example, because personal privacy is important, David was careful not to intrude and not to encourage the conversation to go further than our neighbour, Julie, might have wished. Because David was able to respect her limits she seemed to have a positive experience when talking with him. Additionally, because

he did not try to encourage her to disclose more than she wished about her painful issues, she is likely to feel safe and comfortable when talking to him in the future.

Do you see the difference between using counselling skills in a conversation and just being a friend without using the skills? When we use counselling skills we invite the other person to talk more fully about their emotional feelings and thoughts in order to help them to feel better. When we use normal social communication skills we usually avoid doing this. Notice how it's possible to choose whether to use counselling skills or whether to respond in a different way, just as most friends would.

You can choose whether or not to use counselling skills taking into account the relationship, the time available, the situation, and your own personal resources

Clearly, using counselling skills helps people to unload the burdens they are carrying by sharing problems in a way which enables them to deal with their emotional issues, make decisions, and feel better. Using counselling skills can also be satisfying for the person who uses them.

THE IMPACT ON YOU IF YOU USE COUNSELLING SKILLS

Although using counselling skills can be satisfying, we need to caution that there may be some level of emotional impact on anyone who chooses to use these skills. If you listen to other people as they talk about their emotional feelings and problems, there may be emotional consequences for you (see Chapters 5 and 10).

Let's go back to the example which we gave before, concerning our neighbour, Julie. When Julie started to tell David about her worries, she got in touch with some deep and painful emotions. As might be expected, because David is a person who is emotionally sensitive himself, the painful emotions which she was talking about triggered off similar, but less powerful, emotional feelings

within him. Additionally, he was reminded of painful times in his own life. At some level it must have been painful for him to listen to her talk about her sadness, as she related her story. Thus, one of the costs of using counselling skills is that we are likely to be brought in touch with our own inner pain relating to our past and unresolved problems. Had David behaved like a typical neighbour and friend he might have said to Julie, 'I'm very sorry to hear that your son and daughter-in-law have problems and hope things will soon improve for them', and then changed the subject. By doing this he would have avoided listening to the neighbour's painful issues and would also have avoided having to face emotional pain himself.

If you decide to use counselling skills, then you need to be aware that you will be deliberately inviting people to talk about painful emotions and difficult problems. Consequently, you will have to face your own emotional responses to what they tell you. We are convinced that this is one of the reasons why the majority of the population put limits on their natural ability to use counselling skills. Most people have learnt smart ways of steering a conversation away from painful topics in order to protect themselves from the painfulness of listening to other people's problems. Instead of inviting a person to keep talking, people will commonly say things such as, 'Oh well, that's life', 'Never mind, things can only get better', or they may simply change the subject.

How many times have you heard someone say, 'I've got too many problems of my own to be bothered with other people's problems'? We might think that this is a very uncaring attitude. However, we believe that it is quite legitimate for a person to have this attitude. This is particularly so for people who lead stressful lives and have significant personal problems of their own. However, for us, the satisfaction which we receive as we help other people by using counselling skills is well worthwhile. We hope that the same will be true for you.

THE ADVANTAGES OF USING COUNSELLING SKILLS

From our experience, using counselling skills to help others can be very satisfying indeed. Through enabling other people to talk about and deal with their emotional experiences and to talk about and find solutions to their problems, it is possible to achieve considerable personal satisfaction. Our hope is that you will have similar positive experiences to ours.

Also, it is worth noting that if we are respectful of other people, and use our counselling skills sensitively, then our relationships with them may be enhanced, because they will find that they are able to relate to us in ways that are satisfying and meaningful for them.

EXPECTATIONS OF YOURSELF

If you are to have positive experiences when using counselling skills you will need to have a clear idea of your expectations of yourself. In order to help you to think further about your expectations, you might like to consider a practical example. Imagine that somebody called Michael comes to talk with you and tells you the following:

During the last week, he has lost a job, which was very important to him. He has discovered that there is another job which he could have, but it's in a city which is six hours travelling time away from where he currently lives with his partner. His partner would not be able to go with him if he were to take the new job, and he is in a dilemma about what to do. He is also emotionally distressed because the job that he lost was very important to him.

Imagine that Michael went to school with you and that you play tennis with him regularly. While having a cup of coffee after your game of tennis today he has told you about his problem. He asks you for advice; should he take the new job or should he stay where he is without a job so that he can stay with his partner?

This example raises questions which apply to many situations in which the opportunity arises to use counselling skills as a way of helping. Perhaps you would like to stop reading for a minute to think about what expectations you might have of yourself in helping Michael.

We're going to list some possible expectations that we could have, and then think about whether they are realistic or not. Here they are:

1. I'll help him to find a job near where he and his partner live.
2. I'll talk to his partner and see if I can convince her to move with him.
3. I'll try to change his belief about needing to go to a new job.
4. I'll tell him to go to the new job and say that if his partner really loves him she will go with him.
5. I'll tell him that his relationship with his partner is more important than his job so he should stay with his partner.

What do you think of the above expectations?

Are you surprised when we say that we believe *all* of the expectations listed above are inappropriate and unrealistic! Can you guess why?

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS WHEN USING COUNSELLING SKILLS

The expectations described are unrealistic for the following reasons:

1. If we expect that we can solve someone else's problems then we are being unrealistic and setting ourselves up for failure. Generally, it isn't possible to solve somebody else's problems. Every person has to solve their own problems. However, the use of counselling skills can facilitate the process needed for the person to be able to find their own solutions.
2. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to change someone else's beliefs or attitudes unless the person wants to change the way

they think. Trying to convince someone to think differently, or to do something they really don't want to do, will not work.

3. It is often sensible to avoid giving advice even when asked for it. Of course, there are many exceptions to this rule in everyday life.

Giving advice – is it sensible or not?

The question of whether or not to give advice can be a difficult one and is very dependent on the context in which the advice is sought. There are many situations in everyday life where it is sensible and appropriate to give advice. For example consider the following:

- If, as a paramedic, a person phones you in a very distressed state to tell you that their son has just fallen off a ladder and is unconscious, obviously it would be essential for you to give some clear advice in order to save the young person's life.
- You are in a management position and know that what one of your staff is doing will lead to negative consequences. You therefore have a responsibility to give advice.
- You are a teacher and a student asks you about job opportunities which could arise if they were to undertake particular courses of study. You may wish to give factual information and advice about career options.

Clearly, there are limitless examples of situations where giving advice is the smart thing to do. However, there are many everyday situations in which it is not smart to give advice. We will explain why, but before we do we suggest that you might want to take a minute or two to think about why giving advice is often unhelpful. What ideas do you have?

How do the reasons you have thought of compare with our list?

- If you give advice, the advice may fit for you but not for the other person. The other person may reject the advice or may be unable to act on it. Either way, that person will not be left

feeling good because having talked with you they have not accepted your advice.

- The person may take your advice and it may result in a positive outcome. Although this may help you to feel good, the danger is that the person concerned will believe that you are a wise person who needs to be consulted whenever difficult decisions are to be made. In effect you will have taken away the person's confidence in their ability to make decisions for themselves.
- The person may take the advice and it may result in a negative outcome. In this case the person is likely to be justifiably angry with you!

We need to accept that people with problems will commonly ask those they trust for advice. Sometimes a person will ask for advice by saying something like, 'What would you do?' or, 'I don't know what to do. What do you think I should do?' When faced with questions like these, we suggest that you respond directly and make it clear that it is more important for the person concerned to do what is right for them rather than to do what might fit for you. For example you might respond by saying something like:

I think that what's most important is for you to do what is right for you. What options do you have?

Of course, the person might respond by saying, 'I don't know, and that's why I'm asking you what to do.' In which case you might respond with:

I don't know what the best solution is for you. But, if we keep talking about it we might discover some options.

It may also be helpful to let the person know that what they are trying to figure out is difficult and possibly confusing.

Giving advice can only help the person to solve problems and make decisions if you are able to offer accurate and up-to-date information which relates directly to their current situation

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

When we use counselling skills we need to make sure that the person we're trying to help doesn't have unrealistic expectations of us. Similarly we need to be careful not to set expectations of ourselves which are unrealistically high.

Recognising your limits

Be kind to yourself by being realistic about how much you can help another person. At times you may ask yourself, 'Can I help this person?'. If you are unsure, remember that you can always suggest that they talk to someone else who is more qualified to help. We all have limits to what we can do to help others. Consequently, we need to have a clear understanding of the limits to our own personal commitment to helping others. There will be times when you will recognise that more expert, or specialist, help is needed, and will recommend that the person you are helping should talk to someone else who is better qualified. Referring a person for help to someone who has appropriate qualifications and training is a responsible and appropriate course of action in situations where you realise that you do not have the expertise required. Recognition of our own limits is essential if we are to be responsible when trying to help others.

Recognise your limitations so that you know when to refer someone you want to help to a person who has the required qualifications, training and experience

Setting realistic expectations

We think that realistic expectations include:

1. Trying to create a trusting, caring relationship with the person seeking help.

2. Actively listening to the person's story, so that the person feels heard and understood.
3. Trying to recognise and acknowledge the person's emotional feelings and allowing them to talk about these.
4. Trying to help the person to sort out their confusion and resolve troubling issues.
5. Providing the person with an opportunity to consider solutions to problems, to consider alternatives and to make decisions which fit for them.

What other expectations might you add to this list?

Are they realistic?

Hopefully, the outcome of helping a person will be that they will feel better emotionally. Additionally they may be able to resolve issues, find solutions to problems and make beneficial decisions. It would be great if these things were always achieved, but to expect that this will necessarily happen is unrealistic.

Sometimes you may discover that inviting a person to talk to you by using counselling skills results in them getting in touch with strong emotions which leave them in a disturbed state. If this happens, it is responsible and sensible to suggest to them that they seek help from a suitably qualified person.

We believe that the most important expectation, which certainly can be achieved, is for you to listen in a caring and respectful way so that the person seeking help knows that someone has heard what they have to say and has recognised the painfulness of their situation. If you can do this, you will be performing a very useful service and are likely to gain a sense of personal satisfaction.

chapter summary

- In order to help other people we need to listen and communicate with them in ways that enable them to share their troubles and feel better.
- We need to listen in a caring and respectful way so that the person concerned knows that someone has heard what they have to say and has recognised the painfulness of their situation.

- Basic counselling skills can be used in everyday conversation to help people to talk about their problems and emotional feelings, and to make decisions.
 - Using basic counselling skills is not the same as counselling, so we all need to recognise our limitations and refer to qualified counsellors when appropriate.
 - You can choose when, and when not, to use counselling skills.
 - We need to have realistic expectations of ourselves.
 - There are disadvantages in giving advice although in some situations this is essential and/or desirable.
 - Using counselling skills can be emotionally demanding, but satisfying.
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ASSIGNMENT EXERCISES FOR COURSEWORK STUDENTS

1. Think about a time in the past when you have helped someone else who had a problem. Describe the things that you did and the ways you behaved which you think were helpful to the other person. Also describe things that you did and ways that you behaved that might not have been helpful to the other person.
2. Describe situations which arise in either your professional or social life where you believe that the use of counselling skills would be helpful. Explain what you would hope to achieve for the other person and for yourself by using such helping skills.
3. When we are trying to help other people it is important for us to recognise our limits. Discuss, using practical examples to illustrate your answer, how you will recognise that you have reached the limit of your ability to help and thus need to suggest that the person seeking help should consult with someone who has more expertise.

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