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# Introduction

This book focuses on the skills and processes used by a range of helping practitioners to interact with clients to explore the nature of their situations and concerns. The process of conducting interviews is central to the work of many of those employed in most social care settings and so this features in education programs preparing students for such work.

Commonly applied communication processes enable practitioners to intervene at key points where people interact with their environments and this is often through competently managed interviewing. This interviewing work includes a variety of assessment and intervention services at primary, secondary and tertiary community and health care levels with individuals, families and a range of community groups. It occurs in all these areas, whether formally organized or occurring naturalistically within aspects of work. Face to face and head to head then, practitioners listen, respond and creatively work with all sorts of people in supporting their search for a better life.

## **The purpose of this book**

The primary purpose of this book is to support the development of readers' knowledge and skill in conducting human service interviews, in particular in managing the process with intentionality and empathy. A well-managed professional interview achieves its purposes whilst also attending to the care of the individual client. In this sense this book is also about doing no harm. It also adopts a strengths-focused approach in many respects. The book is intended to be of value to all those who plan to work as helpers – as social workers, nurses and a range of others in the human services.

## **Who is the interviewer?**

The interviewer referred to throughout this book is the person in charge of a helping interaction and who sees their role as assisting the person

who is usually their client, to explore life issues and to understand their own contribution to their problems and to locate solutions that work for them in a long-term sense. The helping professions – social work, health and welfare work and community work, to include just a few fields of endeavour – comprise an essential field of practice in most countries. Practitioners interact with clients across the full range of health, family, youth, justice, housing and education service sectors in most societies. Such workers are located in the full scope of human services – in federal, state and local government settings, in non-government organizations and in other public and private providers. For example, the International Federation of Social Workers (2000) defines social work broadly as a profession that promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being, utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems. The skills and processes discussed in this book are basic to ethical professional practice and assist readers consistently to apply competence and care in this important work.

Throughout the book at times the terms interviewer, counsellor, practitioner, worker and helper are used interchangeably to refer to the person conducting a ‘helping’ interaction. In the title and throughout his book, Hugman (2005) refers to most of these professional groups as ‘caring professions’, defined as those undertaking ‘work in which the human person is both the object and subject whether physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually’ (Hugman 2005, p. 1). It is the case then that social workers, health workers and others employed in the human services frequently sit down with their clients and begin a conversation to find out what is happening in their lives and work with them to locate possible solutions.

### **The helping model in this book**

The model of helping described in this book is reflected over several chapters and is based on strengths-focused work and on a three-stage process. In the *first stage*, clients are encouraged by the interviewer to focus on their situation to locate the matters most in need of attention. This is generally referred to as a process of *exploration* where clients are encouraged to think more clearly about their feelings, the situations surrounding them and what they are doing to cope with it all. This first stage segues into the *next stage* which focuses more clearly on *the*

*behavioural goals of clients* – both in terms of coping behaviours (for which clients are affirmed and which are the foundation for later work) and sometimes in terms of dysfunctional behaviours that complicate their lives and may need to be changed. The *final stage* is about locating a *stepped* and carefully arranged *change process* that supports clients to build on and learn additional coping strategies and to locate solutions. Essential features of this model include a *strengths focus* where all clients are affirmed as experts in their own lives in terms of current coping capacities (De Jong and Berg 2008, p. 18) and a *cognitive-behavioural approach* in reference to the consistent focus on behaviours in all stages and the goals and change processes employed in supporting clients to learn new life skills.

### **Qualities of the effective professional helper**

As helping can occur in a wide range of settings, are there some stable practitioner skills and competencies that are effective in most settings? I believe so and these are detailed throughout several of the following chapters. For example, competent practitioners know how to *begin interviews*, to *focus them* on relevant issues and to *conclude* them. Effective helpers also employ *culturally appropriate nonverbal skills* and *verbal responses* that show respect for and understanding of their clients. The *verbal skills*, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, are primarily reflective and empathic in nature and focus on clients' *feelings*, the *situations* they are currently in and their *behaviour* within these. This is also achieved with the use of *purposeful* and *deliberate* focusing skills where the practitioner guides the client to begin the interaction, to discuss and move between productive issues and to conclude with a sense of achievement. A successful interviewer then is *actively empathic*, productive in terms of *achieving outcomes* and focused on clients' *positive coping skills* and ultimately on *solutions*. Competence is also about *values* and the ability to accept a wide range of cultural perspectives in clients' life management issues. Finally, *self-care* is important as effective helpers understand the erosive potential of emotional labour and have lifelong strategies to support themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally.

### **Using this book**

It is recommended that each chapter is completed in sequence as this will allow reading, reflection and any related practice activities to be

approached with a background of previous understanding. Ideally, the guidance of a tutor or teacher will assist readers in interpreting the meaning of it, in structuring practice activities to illustrate and demonstrate issues and skills and in providing feedback on skill progress and knowledge development. For readers studying without such guidance, I hope this book provides perspectives on the counselling interview that are relevant to each reader's specific learning needs.

The book begins with a description of basic skills and processes involved in the helping interview, the three stages of the helping process and current contexts of human service work. Then it examines the process involved in initiating the helping interaction and moves on to paraphrasing – a major response type in the empathic enterprise. Questions and other probes are described as part of managing the direction and focus of the interview. The book then moves on to goals and action work and the use of techniques related to motivational and cognitive-behavioural approaches. Helping when crises occur, including violence and self-harm, is discussed and the book concludes with a discussion of stress, self-care and reflexive qualities in managing the important work of interviewing in the human services.

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