

ADULT COUNSELLING PROJECT  
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Seminar Paper: Adult Counselling: The Initial Counselling Contact

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The thirteen principles given in this paper for conduct of the initial counselling session are based on the assumption that adults are (at least in principle) legally and psychologically responsible for their own actions. For the most part, adult counselling should attempt to increase self-reliance and assist help-seekers to establish even greater control and direction over their own lives. One main result of effective counselling is to reduce the need for counselling.

The first contact between counsellor and help-seeker is quite important and will frequently set the tone for subsequent meetings. An initial counselling session may be thought of as successful if the help-seeker leaves with a feeling of confidence that he or she has come to the right place for assistance, a place where concerns can be openly discussed, solutions can be sought, information can be secured - in other words a place where improvement in one's life situation seems possible. Realistic hopefulness is a powerful motivator for a person to continue seeking aid and improvement.

There are no mechanical rules to follow in getting through the first counselling session. Most experienced counsellors have developed certain procedures which they follow in a flexible fashion. It is important to establish a basis for interpersonal communication and very tentatively determine some counselling goals. It is necessary to remember also that sometimes one contact is all that is needed to eliminate the conditions which brought the person to counselling. Thus the initial contact may also be the final contact. In most instances, however, counselling involves several meetings - depending of course, upon the circumstances which brought about a need for counselling and depending upon the willingness and ability of both the help-seeker and the help-giver to work for satisfactory resolutions.

On the other hand, if the help-seeker leaves the first contact feeling that the help-giver was uninterested, too dictatorial, too impatient, clumsy, or too "chummy", then a very poor tone is set for further contacts. In fact, the help-seeker is looking for a counsellor who is reliable, attentive and caring. An effective counsellor does know what to do in the first counselling session. However, what he does will vary to fit the needs of each help-seeker. The guidelines which follow are not intended to fit every occasion. They are meant as general suggestions and not specific prescriptions.

1. Establishing psychological contact. When two people open conversations, they usually exchange a few words of small-talk, or "chit-chat". If brief, such comments as "I guess you had a hard time getting here with the snow and all", or some other beginning remark are appropriate.

However, such small talk should be put aside very quickly by the help-giver saying something like "what brings you here?" or "Mr. Smith mentioned that you might be stopping by - what can I do for you?". These statements begin to define the purpose of the counselling session and set a down-to-work tone.

A quiet, friendly, down-to-business opening which brings both the help-seeker and the help-giver to the purpose of the meeting is desirable. The help-giver should not initiate conversation which can be interpreted as over-concerned, trivial, indifferent, over-dramatic, buttering-up, overly friendly, official, or expert-like.

2. Recognizing the reasons for seeking help. Help-seekers often are unable to say clearly why they are seeking help or they may give safe or weak reasons for wanting help. Thus it is up to the help-giver to take the lead in exploring and identifying the reason or reasons why counselling is being requested. To overlook this step may lead to much fumbling about in the dark and false starts in later sessions.

It is best to stay away from a "problem" focus. Actually, people don't have "problems". What they do have are concerns, difficulties, situations, relationships, and conditions under which they live. People are always responding in varying degrees of effectiveness to these life conditions and concerns.

By clarifying what are the factors in one's life which need attention and improvement, counselling may provide a basis for discussing and learning how to improve one's performance and life conditions.

Rather than locate "the problem", an initial task of the help-giver is to aid the help-seeker recognize what changes are desired- and to aid the help-seeker realize that behavior can be improved and conditions can be changed and the help-seeker can (must) have an important part to play in this process of improvement and change.

3. Has help already been sought? If so, where and when and for what reasons? A help-seeker usually comes to counselling with pre-set notions about counselling. If the previous experience has been helpful, then the individual's orientation will be positive - or dependent! Often a person seeks help as a result of talking to a friend or acts upon hearsay about counselling. An effective counsellor tries to determine if the help-seeker has had (or is having) help on the issue at hand from any source: a minister, teacher, counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist, friend, relative, neighbor, etc. This knowledge can help straighten out what is expected from counselling and avoid confusion, contradictory advice and interference with other counselling.
4. Recognizing the help-seeker's expectations. There are several reasons for finding out what the help-seeker expects from the counselling situation. First, a help-seeker may have completely unrealistic expectations which can never be met through counselling. Second, if a counsellor fails to clarify why the help-seeker has come for counselling, the result may be a long and frustrating tangent. Some people want very specific help-like help in getting a job or information about how to go to school. Others want help with personal

distress - marriage, child-rearing, loneliness, death in the family, etc. Others are not able to say very clearly just what they wish help with beyond saying that they are dissatisfied or uneasy or upset. But even knowing that a help-seeker is not able to state clearly what is expected or what is the matter is a start!

5. Provide a clear definition of what kind of counselling can be expected. Some time during the first contact, the counsellor should focus directly upon what the help-seeker expects and explain what kind of counselling can be given in this particular situation. Sometimes there is a big gap between what the help-seeker expects and what the help-giver is willing or able to give. If this is so, then the earlier this discrepancy is known, the better off both will be. Some guidelines for the help-giver in defining what he or she is able to give are:
- (a) don't beat around the bush,
  - (b) don't make promises that can't be delivered,
  - (c) don't suggest something which you have only read about but do not have direct, practical experience with,
  - (d) say what you can do and will do, as help-giver,
  - (e) say what you expect of the help-seeker,
  - (f) state counselling goals in language which is appropriate to the help-seeker,
  - (g) explain that counselling often means (mental) work and is more than idle conversation or cheap advice,
  - (h) check-out with the help-seeker to find out if what you are offering is what he or she is seeking.

Trying to establish a definition of what is meant by counselling makes it possible to focus and evaluate the counselling process by asking (at a later time) "What has this got to do with what we said we are trying to accomplish here?".

6. State the confidential nature of counselling. A help-seeker has the right to know who else (if anyone) besides the help-giver will have access to any information or data which is given through counselling. In fact the help-seeker has the right to know if anyone else will even know that help is being sought.

The help-giver should not give a long-winded assurance about confidentiality. A short, matter-of-fact statement is preferable. Long assurances merely breed suspicion. If information is going back to a referral agent, then the help-seeker should know this.

The help-seeker and help-giver should discuss how information is to be given to other parties, if information is to be given - and when. This is especially true where others such as parents, spouses, or employers are possibly to be involved.

7. One of the most important functions of the initial counselling contact is to explore and search for meaningful counselling content and issues. While the help-seeker is the ultimate "authority" on what is important, the help-giver has a responsibility to encourage active exploration of the question "What should we focus on?" There are no formulas for this but frequent explorations include:
- (a) work obligations and situations,

- (b) checking out physical symptoms - eating, sleeping, exercise, etc.,
- (c) finding out who is especially significant in the help-seeker's world right now,
- (d) exploring the help-seeker's use of time and organization of life activities,
- (e) exploring emotional ups and downs,
- (f) exploring personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions.

In some initial contacts, there is very little need to search for meaningful contact since the help-seeker will already have clearly defined needs and expectations.

8. Estimating the help-seeker's ability to cope and change. Counselling can be quite frustrating - especially to the help-giver who fails to perceive a client's potential for change. If a help-seeker does not seem to profit from counselling, there may be several explanations, not the least of which may be a limited capacity to cope or to change. Counselling is a process aimed at improving how a person thinks and feels about his life situation. Improvement in how one thinks and/or feels about important issues in life paves the way for more productive and rewarding behavior. In trying to determine a help-seeker's potential for change, one must try to keep in mind not only behavior but also the individual's ability to think and his ability to identify and manage emotions. One need not feel badly about failing to do the impossible.
9. Recognizing feelings. In almost all counselling contacts, feelings play an important part. Reducing negative emotions and their causes as well as promoting positive feelings is a necessary part of the counselling process. It is quite common to find that in an initial contact, the help-seeker is aware of feeling strongly, but doesn't know how to use or manage feelings effectively. It can be crucial to subsequent counselling contacts that some sorting-out of feelings and correct identification of significant feelings be facilitated by the help-giver. A feeling is both emotional and meaningful. Feelings are not ideas although ideas can cause feelings and feelings do have a meaning. Clearing up distortion in feelings is often a necessary prelude to successful thinking and behaving. A help-giver who is able to recognize, accept and clarify the help-seeker's feelings in an initial contact has taken an important first step which promote successful counselling in the ensuing contacts.
10. Establish counselling structure. Counselling, whether one contact or many, usually proceeds through four stages: (1) psychological contact; (2) exploration; (3) understanding; (4) action or change. In the very first contact a help-seeker can be encouraged to use the counselling time in a purposeful way. This provides a certain structure to the counselling session and promotes the idea of priorities, plans, and change. Encouraging the help-seeker to use self-help tactics also suggests a self-reliant goal and promotes a learning structure organized around the help-seeker's own capacity and personal resources. From the beginning, counselling structure should be directed toward self-reliance rather than toward dependency.
11. Get a commitment to counselling. If counselling is a one-time contact, then obtaining a commitment is not an issue. However, when the help-seeker presents a problem, a request for behavior change, or desires

to change life conditions, several counselling sessions may be called for and obtaining a commitment to counselling is essential. With some help-seekers it is only necessary to arrive at a simple verbal agreement to return. A short written "contract" specifying what both counsellor and help-seeker will do before the next counselling session and specifying an agreement to meet for a set number of times may be necessary, especially for help-seekers who have a reputation of failure to follow through on commitments. One thing is certain: the help-seeker who remains uncommitted is not likely to return for further counselling. If he should return, the chances that counselling will flounder or remain unproductive are great!

12. Prescribe psychological homework. A help-seeker should leave an initial counselling session with firm ideas about what he can do (and has agreed to do) to improve his situation before returning to the next counselling session. For example, a prospective student may agree to study the course brochure before returning. Or a job applicant may agree to go for a specific job interview. Or a person may agree to keep a personal journal and make entries about a conflict situation which he or she is currently experiencing. It is important to elicit "homework" assignments from the help-seeker rather than resorting to imposition by the help-giver. In a sense, the real test of counselling effectiveness is what the help-seeker does outside of the counselling session to improve his situation. Help-seeker responsibility for his or her own behavior and change, learning to take charge of his or her own actions and direction in life often begins in the first meeting with the assumption of psychological homework.
13. Closing the counselling session. A counselling contact should, if at all possible, close on a friendly but business-like note. "I believe that we've gotten a good start today and I'll look for you next Tuesday at 2:30", is an example of a closing remark. Some help-givers feel compelled to go into a lengthy review of what has happened in the session. This is usually not only unnecessary but often boring and detrimental. A brief mutual check-out on progress, goals and agreements is another method of closing.

The thirteen principles which I have presented in this paper certainly do not exhaust all of the possibilities for an initial counselling contact. However, they do represent a checklist by which you can evaluate your own behavior in the initial contact and can provide you with an organized way to think about your own help-giving effectiveness. Needless to say, these same principles may very well continue to apply in later contacts. If you listen to your own counselling session on tape or observe a session on videotape, then you can use the list to check for signs of the thirteen elements.

<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>?</u>
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1. Establish psychological contact.
2. Recognize help-seeker's reasons for seeking help.
3. Determine if other counselling is being (or has been) sought.
4. Recognize the help-seek's expectations.
5. Provide a definition of what kind of counselling can be expected.
6. State the confidential nature of counselling.
7. Locate meaningful counselling content.
8. Estimate the help-seeker's ability to cope and change.
9. Recognize significant feelings.
10. Establish counselling structure.
11. Get a commitment to counselling.
12. Prescribe psychological homework.
13. Close the session.

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