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# Counselling Skills

**2015-16 & 2016-17**  
**Social Work Department**



# Syllabus

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

In this course you will briefly consider the core communication skills of counselling: those fundamental skills that alone or together can help a client to access their deepest thoughts or clarify their future dreams.

The skills we will examine here are attending skills, basic questioning skills, confrontation, focusing, reflection of meaning and influencing skills.

Many will be familiar with the skills-development-matrix advocated by the Gordon Training International Institute in California which illustrates the learning stages of skill development in four phases: 1. unconscious incompetence, 2: conscious incompetence, 3: conscious competence and 4: unconscious competence.

		<u>Competence</u>	
		Incompetent	Competent
<u>Consciousness</u>	Conscious	Conscious Incompetence	Conscious Competence
	Unconscious	Unconscious Incompetence	Unconscious Competence

## Conscious-Competence Model

Source: Gordon Training International, California, USA

To illustrate this concept let's consider the apprentice carpenter, Stan.

When Stan begins his apprenticeship all he knows is that he loves working with wood. He saws, chisels and carves pieces of wood to create basic sculptures and amateur pieces of furniture.

At this stage, Stan is unaware of the enormous learning curve he is about to embark on (i.e. he is unconscious of what he needs to learn). As he begins his study and watches some of the experienced carpenters work, he begins to realise how much he has to learn to become a master of his trade. Stan is now conscious of his incompetence.

Further, as Stan progresses through his apprenticeship he begins to gain new skills (he must concentrate on holding the wood and the tools at certain angles to bring about the result he wants). This, at first, takes enormous concentration but he is gaining confidence. Stan is now conscious of how skilled he is becoming.

Finally, Stan completes his apprenticeship and goes on to open his own business. In a few years, he is making wonderful pieces of furniture, hardly thinking about what he has to do to bring about the exquisite results he produces. Stan is now unconsciously competent. He simply does his work, barely paying attention to the process (sometimes signing along to the radio in the background). He no longer has to concentrate on every stage of his work.

In the same way, professionals build their skills in communication by progressing through these stages. Professionals who are finding the use of micro skills awkward or difficult are likely to be in the consciously incompetent stage. Professionals who are using the skills effectively but feel a little unnatural or awkward, are likely to be consciously competent. And Professionals who have learnt the skills thoroughly and are no longer immediately aware that they are using the skills are unconsciously competent.

It can be reassuring to know that you will progress through the skill-development matrix. It is only a matter of time and practice before you master the skills and they become second nature to you.

### SUMMARY OF COUNSELLING SKILLS

Micro-skill	Purpose	When it's used	Examples
Attending Behaviour	Attending behaviours encourage clients to talk and show that the counsellor is interested in what's being said.	Throughout entire counselling interview. Particularly important in the initial stages of establishing rapport.	Attentive body language (eye contact, leaning forward slightly, encouraging gestures)
Questioning	Effective questioning helps guide the counselling conversation and may assist in enriching the client's story.	Questioning is useful in the information gathering stage of the interview. It can however be an important skill to use throughout the entire process.	<p>"What would you like to talk about today?"</p> <p>"When does the problem occur?"</p>

Responding	Accurate Responding allows the counsellor to confirm with the client that they are being heard correctly.	Responding is useful throughout all stages of a counselling interview. It helps the counsellor to clarify and encourage clients' stories.	"Let me see if I've got this right. You want to go back to full time study but are worried about your financial commitments?"
Noting and Reflecting	Noting and reflecting is used to bring out underlying feelings.	Noting and reflecting can assist in adding the emotional dimension to the client's story, so is often used in the interview stages of gathering information and exploring alternatives.	"You feel disappointed because your mother didn't call you on your birthday."
Client Observation	Skilled client observation allows the counsellor to identify discrepancies or incongruities in the client's or their own communication.	Observation is a skill that is utilised throughout the entire counselling interview.	Observing body language, tone of voice and facial expressions.
Confrontation	Confrontation is a skill that can assist clients to increase their self-awareness. It can be used to highlight discrepancies that clients have previously been unaware of.	Confrontation is often used when the counsellor observes mixed messages or incongruities in the client's words, behaviours, feelings or thoughts. Confrontation should only be used after rapport has been developed between client and counsellor.	"You say you would like to do further study but you haven't contacted the training institution."
Focusing	Focusing enables a counsellor to direct client's conversational flow into certain areas.	Focusing is a skill that is relevant to all stages of a counselling interview. This skill however should be used sparingly.	After noticing that a client has mentioned very little about his family, the counsellor, (believing the family is relevant) directs the

			conversation toward the client's family.
Influencing	Influencing may facilitate change in the way a client chooses to think or act.	Influencing is generally used when the client is exploring alternative ways of thinking or behaving.	A young person has just started taking drugs. The counsellor discusses the possible long and short term consequences of his/her actions.

## **Chapter 2 – Attending Behaviour**

Attending is the behavioural aspect of building rapport. When a counsellor first meets with a client, they must indicate to the client that they are interested in listening to them and helping them. Through attending, the counsellor is able to encourage the client to talk and open up about their issues.

Eye contact is important and polite (in Western society) when speaking or listening to another person. This does not mean that the counsellor stares at the client, but maintains normal eye contact to show genuine interest in what the client is saying.

Geldard and Geldard (2001) suggest that to assist clients to relax, counsellors can include in their repertoire, the matching of non-verbal behaviour. This skill can take a little time to learn effectively, but it begins with the counsellor sitting in the same position as the client. For example, if at first the client is sitting on the edge of her chair with her arms outstretched resting on her knees the counsellor can reflect or mirror this position. As the client speaks more, the counsellor can either lean forward, to indicate empathy and understanding, or slowly slide back into the chair to take up a more relaxed sitting position. If the rapport has begun to be built between client and counsellor, the client is likely to follow suit. This will reduce the anxiety levels for the client.

Counselling consists mainly of listening and talking, but sometimes the use of silence can have profound effects on the client in the counselling session. When we first begin as counsellors, sometimes silence can be awkward and we rush to fill the gaps, but as our experience grows, we become more comfortable with the concept of simply “being” with the client.

## **Chapter 3 - Questioning**

Questions during the counselling session can help to open up new areas for discussion. They can assist to pinpoint an issue and they can assist to clarify information that at first may seem ambiguous to the counsellor. Questions that invite clients to think or recall information can aid in a client's journey of self-exploration.

Counsellors should be knowledgeable about the different types of questioning techniques, including the appropriate use of them and likely results. It is also important to be aware and cautious of over-questioning. Asking too many questions sends a message to the client that the counsellor is in control and may even set up a situation in which the client feels the counsellor has all the answers. In determining effective questioning techniques it is important



to consider the nature of the client, their ongoing relationship with the counsellor and the issue/s at hand.

There are two main types of questions used in counselling: (1) Open and (2) Closed.

### Open questions

Open questions are those that cannot be answered in a few words, they encourage the client to speak and offer an opportunity for the counsellor to gather information about the client and their concerns.

Typically open questions begin with: *what, why, how or could*. For example:

1. What has brought you here today?
2. Why do you think that?
3. How did you come to consider this?
4. Could you tell me what brings you here today?

“How” questions tend to invite the client to talk about their feelings. “What” questions more often lead to the emergence of facts. “When” questions bring about information regarding timing of the problem, and this can include events and information preceding or following the event. “Where” questions reveal the environment, situation or place that the event took place, and “Why” questions usually give the counsellor information regarding the reasons of the event or information leading up to the event.

<b>How?</b>	<b>Most often enables talk about feelings and/or process.</b>
<b>What?</b>	<b>Most often lead to facts and information.</b>
<b>When?</b>	<b>Most often brings out the timing of the problem, including what preceded and followed it.</b>
<b>Where?</b>	<b>Most often enables discussion about the environment and situations.</b>
<b>Why?</b>	<b>Most often brings out reasons.</b>

It should be noted that care must be taken by the counsellor when asking “why” questions. Why questions can provoke feelings of defensiveness in clients and may encourage clients to feel as though they need to justify themselves in some way.

### Questioning

As with all professions it is important to evaluate your performance as a counsellor. No one is perfect. No one gets it right 100% of the time. Most people are hesitant to objectively look at their performance. However, in counselling, as in many other professions, it is important to be able to critically evaluate how you performed.

In this way you can identify any areas that may require change.

There are a number of strategies that can be implemented to assist you in monitoring and/or improving the way you conduct your counselling sessions. Here are a few examples:

- Self evaluation

This is the process of reflecting on your own skills, your professional strengths and limitations. Awareness in these areas will enable you to choose professional development or training activities to fill any identified skill or knowledge gaps. Self-awareness of this nature will also enable you to identify clients that are beyond your scope of expertise and will ensure that you refer responsibly.

- Client feedback

Providing client with the opportunity to review the counselling process can be tremendously beneficial for both counsellor and client alike. Not only does it acknowledge the client's opinion as valid and valued, it also provides an opportunity for the counsellor to evaluate his or her current approach and adjust or continue accordingly.

- Peer review

Peer review enables counsellors to come together and discuss individual cases, ethical dilemmas and brainstorm intervention options. It is a process that can increase counsellor accountability and improve the quality of service offered to clients (please ensure confidentiality policies are appropriately upheld).

- Professional supervision

Supervision is an integral part of counselling practice. Within supervision, counsellors can enhance their skill and knowledge base, ensure responsible and ethical practice and monitor their self-care and professional competence. Supervision acts as a mechanism to ensure that a counsellor's approach is aligned with professional standards and reflects the requirements of the industry.

This importance of continually reviewing and updating your skills cannot be over-emphasised. Counsellors would, ideally, use all of the strategies listed above to ensure that they maintain a professional and ethical approach to their work.

### Closed questions

Closed questions are questions that can be answered with a minimal response (often as little as "yes" or "no"). They can help the counsellor to focus the client or gain very specific information. Such questions begin with: *is, are or do*.

For example:

- Is that your coat?
- Are you living alone?
- Do you enjoy your job?

While questioning techniques can be used positively to draw out and clarify issues relevant to the counselling session, there is also the very real danger of over-using questions or using questioning techniques that can have a negative impact on the session. The wrong types of questioning techniques, at the wrong time, in the hands of an unskilled interviewer or counsellor, can cause unnecessary discomfort and confusion to the client.

Ivey & Ivey (2003) describe the following five problem questioning techniques.

#### FIVE PROBLEM QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

##### 1. Bombardment/grilling

This occurs when counsellors get caught into a pattern of asking too many questions one after the other. In doing this, the counsellor is always deciding which issue should be discussed next.

##### 2. Multiple questions

This occurs when counsellors ask several questions at once. For example "Please tell me about yourself - how old are you, where were you born, do you have any children and what do you do for a living?"

##### 3. Questions as statements

This occurs when counsellors use questions as a way to sell their own points of view. For example, "Don't you think it would be helpful if you studied more?" "What do you think of trying relaxation exercises instead of what you are doing now?"

##### 4. Questions and cultural differences

This is where a counsellor needs to be aware of any cultural influences that may make asking questions inappropriate for clients from a specific culture. For example the rapid-fire North American questioning style is often received less favourably by other cultures.

##### 5. Why questions

#### Observation skills

By accurately observing non-verbal behaviour, a counsellor can gauge the affect her/his words and actions have upon the client.

For example, when a client enters into the office of the counsellor, the counsellor can gain some indication of how the client is feeling about the session (are they reticent, comfortable, awkward?) by the way the client walks in, takes their seat, and greets the counsellor. If a client is resentful about the counselling session taking place, they may keep their eyes lowered, seem dismissive of the counsellor and sit in a closed position, not encouraging communication.

A counsellor can also gauge the effectiveness of their words by carefully observing the facial expression and eye contact of a client. If a counsellor asks a question that the client may find embarrassing to answer, the client may lower their eyes, or their head, or look away. This will tell the counsellor that the client might be uncomfortable with that statement or question.

#### Chapter 4 - Encouragers, paraphrasing and summarising

A counsellor can encourage a client to continue to talk, open up more freely and explore issues in greater depth by providing accurate responses through *encouraging*, *paraphrasing* and *summarising*. Responding in this way informs the client that the counsellor has accurately heard what they have been saying. Encouragers, paraphrases and summaries are basic to helping a client feel understood.



Encouragers, also known as intentional listening, involve fully attending to the client, thus allowing them to explore their feelings and thoughts more completely. Paraphrasing and summarising are more active ways of communicating to the client that they have been listened to. Summarising is particularly useful to help clients organise their thinking.

The diagram below shows how encouragers, paraphrases and summaries are on different points of a continuum, each building on more of the information provided by the client to accurately assess issues and events.



## Counsellor skills

### Encouragers

Encouragers are a variety of verbal and non-verbal ways of prompting clients to continue talking. Types of encouragers include:

1. Non-verbal minimal responses such as a nod of the head or positive facial expressions
2. Verbal minimal responses such as "Uh-huh" and "I hear what you're saying"
3. Brief invitations to continue such as "Tell me more"

Encouragers simply encourage the client to keep talking. For a counsellor to have more influence on the direction of client progress they would need to make use of other techniques.

### Paraphrases

To paraphrase, the counsellor chooses the most important details of what the client has just said and reflects them back to the client. Paraphrases can be just a few words or one or two brief sentences.

Paraphrasing is not a matter of simply repeating or parroting what the client has stated. Rather it is capturing the essence of what the client is saying, through rephrasing. When the counsellor has captured what the client is saying, often the client will say, "That's right" or offer some other form of confirmation.

Example: *I have just broken up with Jason. The way he was treating me was just too much to bear. Every time I tried to touch on the subject with him he would just clam up. I feel so much better now.*

Paraphrase: *You feel much better after breaking up with Jason.*

### Summaries

Summaries are brief statements of longer excerpts from the counselling session. In

summarising, the counsellor attends to verbal and non-verbal comments from the client over a period of time, and then pulls together key parts of the extended communication, restating them for the client as accurately as possible.

A check-out, phrased at the end of the summary, is an important component of the statement, enabling a check of the accuracy of the counsellor's response.

Summaries are similar to paraphrasing, except they are used less frequently and encompass more information.

### Reflection of feeling

Reflection of feeling, as the name suggests, is similar to paraphrasing except this skill concentrates upon capturing the emotional tones and phrases.

This brings about clarification of feelings and emotions and allows the counsellor to empathise with how the client may be feeling and/or how the client was affected by the event.

With an accurate understanding of a client's feelings through reflection of feeling, the counsellor is often able to appreciate how an event or issue may be affecting the client.

For example, when listening to a client, a counsellor could reflect on the feeling by saying "that experience saddened you".

## Chapter 5 - Confrontation, focusing and reflection of meaning

Generally speaking the term confrontation means challenging another person over a discrepancy or disagreement. However, confrontation as a counselling skill is an attempt by the counsellor to gently bring about awareness in the client of something that they may have overlooked or avoided.

There are three steps to confrontation in counselling. The first step involves the identification of mixed or incongruent messages (expressed through the client's words or non-verbals). The second step requires the counsellor to bring about awareness of these incongruities and assist the client to work through these. Finally, step three involves evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention evidenced by the client's change and growth.

During the counselling process there are four (4) discrepancies which the client could display. The discrepancy can be between:

- Thoughts and feelings
- Thoughts and actions
- Feelings and actions or
- A combination of thoughts, feelings and actions.

Having identified a discrepancy, the counsellor highlights this to the client, using a confrontation statement such as:

- "On the one hand ..., but on the other hand...."

This is a standard and useful format for the actual confrontation. Of course, you may also use variations such as:

- "You say ... but you do ...," or
- "Your words say ... but your actions say ...."

*E.g. "Your words say you would like to spend more time with your sister, but your*

*actions say that it's not a priority for you."*

### Focusing

Ivey and Ivey (2003) have identified seven areas a counsellor can focus on in the counselling session to bring about broader perspectives and potential solutions.

- The first is *Individual focus*, where the counsellor begins the counselling session by focusing totally on the personal aspects of the client; the demographics, history, and the reasons why counselling is sought, from the client. The counsellor will often use the client's name, to help bring about total focus on that client. For example, "Joan, tell me a little about yourself". "Joan, are you the oldest daughter in the family?"
- The second is; *Main theme or problems focus*. Attention is given to the reason why the client sought counselling.
- *Other focus*, as no problem is truly isolated, the client will often speak of friends', colleagues, extended family members and other individuals that are somehow connected with the reason for the client seeking counselling.
- *Family focus*, concerns siblings, parents, children. Flexibility is required in the definition of "Family", as it can have different meanings to different people, i.e. traditional, single parent, nuclear and/or can include extended family members, or very close friends who are given family titles such as Aunt or Uncle.
- *Mutuality focus* is concerned with how the client reacts to the counsellor, because this could be an indication of how the client develops in relation to other people. It attempts to put the counsellor and client on an equal level, with the counsellor asking: "How can we work together?" "How would you like me to help with this situation at this point?"
- *Interviewer focus* is where the counsellor may disclose information about themselves.
- Finally, *Cultural/environmental/context focus*. The counsellor will understand how a client is influenced by the community/i.e.s. in which they grew up, but this can be extended to other issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status to gain a greater understanding of the person the client is today.

### Reflection of meaning

Reflection of meaning refers to the deeply held thoughts and meanings underlying life experiences. For the counsellor who uses reflection of meaning in their work, they will find that clients will search more deeply into the aspects of their own life experiences.

For example, imagine two individuals who take a holiday on an island resort: the same island, the same resort, the same time of year. One of them enthusiastically expresses the wonders of the sunsets, walks along the beach and leisurely life style. While the other complains about the heat, sunburn and boredom they experienced.

This example illustrates how the same event can have a totally different meaning to the different individuals experiencing the event. Hence, the skill of reflection of meaning is to assist clients to explore their values and goals in life, by understanding the deeper aspects of their experiences.

## Chapter 6 - Influencing skills and strategies

Influencing is part of all counselling. Even if the counsellor only used attending skills to

actively listen to the client, being genuinely heard by another person can influence a person's behaviour.

Influencing skills take a more direct approach to client change, with specific alternatives for actions that can promote change quicker and in some cases be more permanent. The influencing skills briefly examined here are interpretation/reframing and information giving.

### Interpretation/reframing

Through interpretation/reframing, the client is encouraged to perceive their experience in a more positive fashion. The counsellor encourages this shift by offering alternative ways of viewing their experience.

For example, a client who is upset about having to move away from home is likely to be focusing on the loss of her support network and the familiarity of her community. The counsellor, while acknowledging the client's loss, could reframe the event to be perceived as an opportunity to experience new places, people and things: an opportunity for growth.

Interpretation/reframing encourage the client to view life situations from an alternative frame of reference. This strategy does not change the facts of a situation, nor does it trivialise the hurt or pain the client may be experiencing.

### Information giving

Information giving involves providing the client with factual information that may assist them in some way (such as details of a community support group or accommodation option). Sometimes clients are not sure where to start to look for the information they need, so counsellors can help their clients find that starting point.

## POINTS TO REMEMBER ABOUT INFORMATION GIVING

1. When giving information:
  - a. Provide data or facts relevant to the client's needs.
  - b. Ensure that the client is receptive to the information.
  - c. Be direct, clear, specific, concise and concrete.
  - d. Break the information into units that the client can utilize.
2. After giving information:
  - a. Check that the client has attended to the data and facts provided.
  - b. Evaluate for distortions and use other interviewing skills to correct them.
3. Use information giving:
  - a. To orient clients to the interviewing process.
  - b. To provide instructions or directions.
  - c. To present feedback.
  - d. To provide alternative perspectives.
  - e. To direct clients to other resources.

Source: Evans, D. R., Hearn, M. T., Uhlemann, M. R. & Ivey, A. E. (1998). *Essential interviewing: a programmed approach to effective communication (5th ed.)*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole (p. 156 – 157).

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