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## The Basics of Counselling: Counselling Redefined

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### **Abstract:**

*Counsellors help people of all ages to live happier, healthier, more productive and functional lives. People seek counselling for a variety of reasons such as depression, anxiety, coping with life transitions, life threatening illnesses, relationship trouble, different types of losses, distress, and different types of addictions to name a few. If we go back a few hundred years, we shall see that psychological issues were approached with unnecessary invasive treatments for lack of knowledge of what counselling or helping entailed and how it would work.*

*Thanks to the evolution of science and knowledge, we now have a clearer understanding of what counselling is and are able to look at issues in a different way. Today, the art of talking therapies such as counselling are used to helping people come to terms with any problems they are facing with an ultimate aim of overcoming them.*

**Keywords:** Counsellor, client, helping, professional, skills

### **1. Introduction**

Preparing and writing such an article for such a broad field that cuts across so many professional disciplines poses unique challenges. The author is aware that the article must be able to speak to all of the diverse helpers in the diverse ways of helping involved in one or the other form of helping with one single voice. It must blend the language of helping in a meaningful way so that professionals from all of the disciplines represented can relate to the material presented therein.

Many people will, at some point in their lives, find themselves in the role of a counsellor without having a true understanding of the concept of counselling or what the role of the professional counsellor entails.

Firstly, it is important to note from the very beginning that there is a big difference between a professional counsellor and a person who uses some counselling skills as part of their role, for example their role as a friend, colleague, a member of the clergy, teacher, nurse, doctor, human resource manager and such professionals. A person who uses counselling skills such as a teacher using counselling skills to help his student deal with either academic or personal issues is not a professional counsellor. He is a teacher who has some counselling skills. Counselling is not his first job. And so is a member of the clergy helping his parishioners or followers of his religion with their issues. These people and many more in different professions may have been exposed to counselling skills and they are being helpful but they are not professional Psychological counsellors. They are using the skills they have to be helpful but within their professions.

Secondly, there are several ways that people can be helpful to someone in distress besides counselling. Counselling is one way of doing it, there are other ways of helping and it is important to acknowledge and differentiate them from psychological counselling. The reason this acknowledgement is important is that many people do one and claim to be doing the other. For instance, someone could be directing a client who is in distress and claim that he is counselling the client.

It is therefore imperative that professional in other fields other than counselling using counselling skills know when they are helping people in other ways other than counselling. These other ways of helping could be one or other of these; giving advice, Fixing or attempting to sort out the problem of the client, giving practical help, preaching, praying with or for the client, directing, giving guidance to the client among many other ways of helping, the list is endless. The truth is, these are ways that people can help others but note that they are not counselling as we shall attempt to define psychological counselling. Should such people find themselves stuck or not able to help, they should use those very skills to sensitively and respectfully refer their clients to a professional counsellor.

A word about advice as other way of helping that is usually confused with counselling. Many people think of counselling as advise giving. Advise giving is invaluable and happens regularly in many areas of our lives, all the way from a trusted friend giving advice to a friend in need, to a member of the clergy giving advice to a parishioner in some sort of crisis. However, in counselling, advise giving has its own challenges. First and foremost, the counsellor is aware that no two people are alike. No two people understand the same language in the same way; their understanding will always be linked to their personal experience of the world. Therefore, during the counselling process, it is important that the counsellor does not try to fit clients into his/her idea of what they should be and how they should act.

Secondly, Advice really is the professional's solution or answer to the client's problem. In other word, my solution to your problem and this rarely works since we are different, unique and have differing preferences in life. Thirdly, in general, people rarely seem to follow advice that others give them, especially if they did not ask for that advice in the first place. Thirdly, giving advice can easily change into counselling by persuasion and can diminish the client's autonomy, confidence and independence. Often times, when clients ask 'what should I do?' they are really asking a rhetorical question of themselves and not asking for someone else to tell them what to do. Yet, professional are so quick in responding to such a question and provide quick answers to the client. Perhaps a better response to such a question is a counter question such as, 'what do you think you can do?' or what are you thinking of doing?', so that this question generates discussion around the presented problem or issue. In addition, rather than falling into the trap of giving advice, a better strategy might be to recognise and acknowledge the feelings and emotions behind such a question which might be, helplessness, hopelessness, confusion, inadequacy, etc. Fourthly, giving advice gives the client the impression that their problems are so simple, so straight forward that the counsellor has answers at their fingertips. That can mean trivializing the client's problem and making nonsense of his or her worries. Worse, it is an insult to the client's intelligence, since they thought they have a problem, yet is nothing, it is so simple. Fifthly, when you give advice, how much of the client's problem do you know? Clients issues are so complex and a few sessions are not adequate for a professional to know everything there is about the presented problem. There are many aspects to a presented problem and professional may not know all of them. Therefore, we should approach advice giving with caution and do it sparingly. Finally, when advice is given, taken and executed by the client, should the client fail in the process or should the decision not work for them, then the professional who gave advice becomes part of the problem. The last thing a professional counsellor would want is being part of the problem of a client, that is an unhealthy connection.

Advice, however well-meant, could prove dangerous or, at least inappropriate. Rose, M. Smith (2005). Professions should let other ways of helping, such as advise be recognised as such not disguised camouflaged as counselling.

## **2. Why Counselling**

To understand the reasons people, seek counselling, we commence with the reality that through the years, human beings, by nature have found comfort in personal sharing of their problems or telling their stories to other people. In Africa, people sat around the fire place, cooking and warming themselves while story telling. This was both educative but also relieving in the ability for people to share their concerns with others. Counselling has not had a long history in its current form, yet it has happened for centuries and longer

The old adage that goes 'a problem shared is a problem halved' tells one universal truth, that when things get tuff or we have to make hard decisions in our lives, that sometimes we need someone to listen and hear our story so that we can get a better idea of the options open for us. Therefore, the reasons of counselling can be traced back to tribal times where people would come together in a group and share their experiences, and sometimes their dreams. As civilization developed, religion offered a type of counselling, usually by the clergy, priests, Imams and the like, who would listen and advise parishioners on their diverse issues and actually they still do. In most societies, the clergy is the first choice that people go to when they run into problems because counselling has not been fully embraced.

## **3. The Origin of Counselling**

It is important to examine the history though briefly, of counselling because a counsellor who is informed about the development of the profession is likely to have a strong professional identity and therefore make significant contributions to this field. By understanding the profession's past, one may better appreciate the present and the future trends of the profession.

The root of modern day counselling dates back to World War 1 and world war II. Before then, soldiers who exhibited significant psychological reactions to their experiences they had at war were misunderstood and at times judged as weak or even disloyal. It later emerged that those who received counselling coped better with life than their counterparts who were not attended to. The aim of the counselling then was to aid these veterans in their adjustment to civilian life after the war. Helping veterans gain employment and education opportunities required different knowledge and skills not just addressing injuries this new position helped counselling psychology to differentiate from other branches or specialties of psychology.

## **4. What Then Is Counselling as We Know It Today?**

The term counselling has eluded definition for years, because it means different things to different people. The author has indicated the many ways people can help others in distress but they are not professional counselling. Those ways indicate what counselling is not, and knowing what counselling is not is so useful, it informs what counselling is.

From an experienced counsellor's article, we may learn several things that would help us unlock our potentials as counsellors in the making. Perhaps a good place to begin looking at is what counselling is not. Counselling is not many things or services that most people say it is. Many people who for one reason or another needed the services of a counsellor or needed to refer to counselling for whatever reason have not bothered to clarify what counselling is all about. Counselling is not many things and in this article we shall consider a few of them that are commonly cited as counselling.

At its simplest, counselling is a process whose aim is to help clients help themselves by making better choices for themselves. The helper or counsellor uses certain skills, adopts certain attitudes an interventions focused on helping the client change specific aspects of their thinking feelings and behaviour or actions.

Counselling then is a professional relationship between somebody needing help and a professional. This professional relationship empowers diverse individual's families and group's mental and emotional health, wellness, education, carrier and other goals in a

client's life. The person needing help is engaged and involved in the process of being helped and this is what makes counselling a therapeutic, curative process.

The person needing help from a professional is called a client, differentiated from someone needing the help of a doctor, called patient. Client because one, the counsellor is not a medical doctor and also because counsellors do not normally operate in a hospital setting. Even when counsellors work for hospitals, the person going to see him or her is not a patient but a client. Counselling is mistakenly seen as a service that mentally sick people seek.

This in a way destigmatises counselling as a place where sick people go. These clients are not sick but perhaps disturbed by an issue. Seen that way, counselling becomes a normal service that people should seek without worrying of being stigmatized.

The above definition contains a number of points that are important for the reader.

Firstly, counselling is sought by someone who has realised he or she needs help. Meaning that a good client is the one who has realised that he has a problem and the problem is so bad, he needs help. When people are referred by either an employer, a parent, a teacher or whoever refers, it is never the same nor is it easy especially if the client does not see the need for counselling. It becomes very challenging for both the counsellor and the client.

Secondly, counselling is a relationship between the counsellor and the client. It is important to note that this is not just an ordinary relationship. It is a working relationship. It is therapeutic relationship. It is professional relationship. If this relationship is blend with any other relationship, it becomes a dual relationship and ordinarily a dual relationship interferes with the dynamics of counselling. Any other relationship can mean, social relationship, work, family, emotional intimacy and the like. Counselling is not something an expert does to a layman, counselling takes place in this working relationship.

Attached to this aspect is the element of communication. Counselling is about communication. Effective communication is about sharing understanding and meaning, communing so that each understands the message being passed. Communication is also about being aware of the one's method of communication especially the one likely to negate the message one is trying to pass. It is important to note that communication is such an important skill because we communicate every single day, whether we are aware of it or not.

Communication requires that while one is talking, the other is listening. A huge percentage of the time allocated for a session, belongs to the client. In any case it is his session, he is the expert on the problem being discussed. The counsellor is the expert on facilitating this session and discussion of the issue presented. This aspect of listening demands that the counsellor pays undivided attention to the client, hearing the message as accurately as possible and making an effort to understand where the client is coming from. As the counsellor listens, he or she clarifies issues with the clients. This amounts to a different kind of listening, different from the ordinary listening, referred to as active listening

Listening is so important, in talking the client hears himself, clarifies for himself as he talks and the counsellor listens. This is the healing or curative power of counselling. The other curative aspect of counselling is that the client is fully involved and engaged in the counselling process. If you think about ordinary conversations, people rarely listen to messages being passed. People listen to those gaps in conversations so that they can sneak in their messages or agendas.

Thirdly counselling is a dynamic process. It is not a one-time event. It has an initiation, middle and a termination. Counsellors not only focus on their client's goals; they help clients accomplish them. This dynamic process comes through using a variety of skills, techniques, other knowledge and methods. Counselling involves making choices as well as making changes.

Fourthly, counselling is conducted with persons individually, in groups and in families in private settings. The counsellor provides a safe environment for the client or clients. The element of privacy and confidentiality is paramount. Confidentiality is professional promise by the counsellor to respect and to keep private the client's information. Of course in counselling confidentiality is not absolute, it is on condition that there is no imminent danger of harming self or others. Life has greater value than confidentiality. So if there is a danger to life of self and others, the professional should inform the significant others and/ or the police if need be. For instance, if there is danger of suicide, the professional needs to know that the client is a good person who is sick and take precaution as necessary. It is also on condition that there is no sexual abuse in case of children. Confidentiality builds trust between the client and the professional.

Fifthly, Counselling must have a goal. What it is that the client wants to achieve, this has to be very clear because it will guide the counselling process. The goal of the counsellor has to be clear too, what it is that the counsellor wants to achieve in this venture with his or her client.

Finally, counselling involves a contract. The when, the how and where questions need to be answered and be very clear between the client and the counsellor. If there are issues of a professional fee, it is addressed in this aspect and a consent form is signed between the client and the counsellor.

### **5. Making Appropriate Responses**

At times people make responses that are not very helpful but they are not aware of them. Whatever a professional does, or say, one should show interest in a client (the person), not necessarily her problem in the process of counselling. Show interest on his or her feelings not necessarily the story. This may sound simplistic but it becomes a challenge especially when client's stories arouse curiosity in professionals. We forget the person and get caught up by the story to satisfy our curiosity.

Counsellors have to remember the reason people or clients give their stories. We can relate this by recalling the reasons we give our own stories. Do we always expect something, an answer, a solution, a quick fix? I suppose not, then what makes us think that that is what others want when they share their stories?

Unfortunately, that is what people think in ordinary conversations and therefore are quick in giving quick fixes to their clients or people they converse with. Then why do we as professionals expect people who give their stories to be looking for the above as in ordinary conversations? If this is what is in the mind of the professional, then responses will be poor and in the process we put clients off and finally lose them. At times, it is important to note, clients want to just share their frustrations with someone just like we all do, to get things off our chests. Therefore, our responses matter a great deal. The counsellor will attempt to build a certain amount of rapport with their client, but not to an extent that would allow them to become emotionally involved.

#### **6. Reference**

- i. Rose, M. Smith (2005). Counselling skills for complementary therapists. Open University press.