

Unit 2 Focus on feelings

Objectives

When you have worked through this unit you will be able to:

- explain how a counselling relationship is built up
- describe the reasons why counsellors focus on feelings
- show an understanding of how counsellors respond to difficult feelings.

Counselling as a different way of relating

In Unit 1 you looked at the aims and attitudes that underlie the counselling process. In this unit you will look at how counsellor and client work together. The relationship between a counsellor and each client is unique and is specifically designed to encourage clients to talk about their deepest and most closely guarded feelings – feelings they may have hardly noticed that they have, or wish that they did not. The counsellor aims to make it safe for clients to express feelings of anger, fear, grief and pain. Such feelings may possibly be unacceptable to other people in the client's life. Of course, clients will not do this unless they feel that the counsellor is dependable. They need to know that they are being taken seriously, treated with respect and accepted for whom they really are. A counsellor's efficacy does not come mainly from good intentions, a liking for people or a desire to help. It comes from a full and explicit commitment to the responsibility of undertaking the counselling process in the client's interests.

People using counselling skills in support of their job role will also find that the relationship plays a key part in the success or otherwise of the counselling process. However, as already stated in Unit 1, the relationship of someone using counselling skills at work will also be influenced by their core job role and the need to adhere to work-based policies, etc. Hence, this unit refers more to counsellors and highlights ways of relating which are important to the counselling process.

The special relationship that is built up between counsellor and client has several unique features, which research indicates is important for a good outcome:

- The counsellor is not judgemental. Instead, she or he listens to examples of times when the client felt bad, ashamed, sad, scared or guilty and sees them as opportunities to resolve uncomfortable feelings about past or present behaviour.

- The counsellor is reliable. He or she keeps to time, and is there when sessions are booked.
- The counsellor conveys warmth, interest in the client, and gives the client his or her full attention.
- The counsellor does not expect or require the client to consider his or her needs or values, and in this sense does not expect to influence the client to behave in accordance with them.

Many other special relationships, such as friendships, are characterised by feelings of closeness, mutual understanding, affection, honesty, intimacy, and mutual care, as well as a feeling of safety to say whatever is thought and to express disagreement. The difference in a counselling relationship, however, is primarily that reciprocity is not there. The client speaks and the counsellor listens. The counsellor does not normally speak about his or her own life events or personal difficulties. There is intimacy because it is touching when anyone shares personal matters and feelings, but it is different from each taking turns to exchange life stories.

Of course, counsellors have to be very good listeners and must be able to open up topics rather than close them down. Counsellors don't respond to the things they are told by explaining them away. For example, they are careful not to respond to a client who is upset by saying he or she must have a cold or is tired, or that it is perfectly obvious the client feels guilty or that they should 'cheer up'. They take care not to divert attention on to their own feelings, for example, by saying things like: 'That's exactly what happened to me! Let me tell you about it!' Or: 'I know how you feel. Why, when my husband died I was in a terrible mess. I'm sure it's exactly the same for you.' Counsellors also avoid the sort of casual moral judgments many of us make without thinking, such as: 'If he's angry, you must have done something to upset him.' Or: 'You shouldn't have done that!' They don't put clients 'in the dock' and ask them to explain their behaviour and why they did it.

Good listening means not being authoritarian, morally judgemental or directive. It means seeing the world from the client's point of view and being on the client's side, accepting the client's feelings and helping him or her express them, however painful or difficult such feelings may be.

Creating a safe framework

Imagine for a moment that you have gone to see a professional to talk over a problem and this is what happens: You arrive on time, but the professional keeps you waiting outside his office for twenty minutes. When you finally get to see him, he does not apologise for the delay and he has

forgotten whom you are and why you have come. You begin to explain but the telephone rings and the professional turns away without a word and spends five minutes talking to his caller. Shortly after he's put down the phone, someone knocks at the door, comes in and delivers a message. A few minutes later, the professional glances at his watch, yawns, and tells you that he has to go because he's already late for another appointment.

Activity 1

How would you feel after a meeting like this? What did the professional do wrong? Compare your response with our answer given at the end of this unit.

Meetings like this go wrong not because of bad luck but because of poor management. A counsellor is aware that counselling work has to be managed. This requires attention to the location and duration of sessions, as well as to the processes of creating a sense of psychological connection and trust.

Location

A counsellor and client need space to work together. A counsellor will organise a quiet space that can be used without anybody else trespassing. Counsellors normally aim to create a space with no interruptions of any sort: they do not answer the phone, nor do they expect anyone to come in. Ideally the counsellor and client cannot be overseen, overheard or distracted.

The room needs to be big enough to work in but small enough for each to hear clearly everything that is said and for the counsellor to pick up changes in the client's mood. If a counsellor sits too close, this can be perceived as threatening by the client. Ideally, seats should be moveable so that the client can move closer or further away until he or she is comfortable. The seats need to be comfortable and of a roughly equal height so that neither one looks down on the other.

The counsellor needs to see the client clearly. Watching their facial expressions enables the counsellor to read his or her feelings, and eye contact will help to reassure him or her that the counsellor has heard what is said.

Lighting needs to be good enough for people whose hearing is impaired to lip read. All physical barriers to communication should be reduced too, for example, the desk that might be in the way, the low chair that forces the client to look up at the counsellor, the uncomfortable face-to-face position where neither person can stretch their legs or make a movement without embarrassment. Counsellors routinely have tissues clearly available, giving the hint that tears are acceptable and the client's needs have been thought of.

Time and duration

The counsellor is responsible for suggesting the time and duration of the sessions. The client will depend on the counsellor's reliability. If the counsellor were to be late or forget a session, the client might feel that he or she is unimportant and would certainly have a right to feel let down or angry.

Most counselling sessions last fifty minutes or an hour. Sometimes sessions for children are shorter, and some sessions for couples or families last longer. It should always be absolutely clear how long the session is planned to last so that the client knows this too. The client can then regard this time as his own. Having a clock that both can see, and reminding the client five minutes before the session is due to end that the session will finish soon, protects him from suddenly being thrust out into the street before he can compose himself. It is good practice to ensure that all sessions in a series are the same length. A little flexibility will do no harm, but it may not be good for either person if the sessions last longer than they have stamina for.

The contract

When a counsellor meets a client for the first time, it's a good idea to spell out the details discussed above so that both share an understanding of the commitments involved. Of course, to take too long over this would put clients off, so it needs to be said briefly, or detailed in a leaflet that clients can take away and reflect on. When the client agrees to these ground rules, this is called the 'contract'. Typically, counsellors make contracts about the following:

Confidentiality

Everything that is said will be in confidence unless the working context requires otherwise. For example, if the counsellor is working in a GP surgery, or as part of a team, some matters may need to be shared, and the limits to what can be kept confidential need to be explicit. A normal caveat is that confidentiality would only be breached if the client was thought to be a danger to herself or another person, or for legally required reasons such as if they were planning treasonable activity.

Supervision

All counsellors who work within the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) ethical framework are required to have a monthly consultation, called supervision, however experienced they are. Clients need to know that this is the case, and that they may be discussed in a respectful and usually anonymous fashion with a supervisor. Some like to know the supervisor's name, especially in small communities where there are many overlapping relationships.

Some clients need reassurance that any notes the counsellor keeps are held securely, and to know who has access to them. Data protection legislation requires counsellors to make their notes accessible to clients if they request this.

Practical issues such as frequency of sessions, payment for them, and planned absences need to be clarified at the contract stage. Payment for cancelled sessions or sessions that the client does not attend also need to be clarified. Usually, these ground rules only need to be made explicit at the first session. However it is common for changes to be discussed if difficulties arise.

Trust and rapport

The example of the inattentive professional described in Activity 1 illustrates the difficulty of creating rapport unless the counsellor gives their full attention to the client, and tunes in to his or her needs and ways of relating. Trust has to be earned, and the contract can help to build this, but it takes time before a client will speak of tender feelings, or those that they are embarrassed, guilty or ashamed about. Many new clients, particularly if they are unused to being listened to, are not quite sure how to begin. The best way to help is to stay quiet and listen, however long it takes for the words to come out.