

Chapter 1

Introducing Counselling Skills

In This Chapter

- ▶ Developing as a listening helper
- ▶ Realising that self-understanding is essential
- ▶ Discovering the challenges of ethical practice
- ▶ Preparing to understand others

In all sorts of work and personal situations, you come across people (family, friends, work colleagues, employees, and others) who are experiencing some kind of personal difficulty or dilemma, or simply need to review an aspect of their life. The task of listening to and helping such a person is made easier and more productive by using counselling skills within a supporting framework. These skills can even help in other situations, such as when the other person is your boss or with an annoying neighbour. By developing your capacity to use these skills, you can:

- ✔ Have fewer frustrating conversations.
- ✔ Understand better where the other person is coming from.
- ✔ Understand your own reactions better.
- ✔ Manage the listening process more effectively.

Using counselling skills in a helping relationship enables help-seekers to become less distressed and to lead more constructive, satisfying lives.

Developing as a listening helper and going through the helping process are often depicted as journeys because people can feel transformed, as if they've travelled a significant distance. Like all journeys, you'll face frustrations and you may wonder why you ever set off in the first place but, because human beings are complex and using counselling skills is challenging, you have a fascinating and rewarding journey ahead. In this chapter I walk you through this journey.

Knowing Yourself to Understand Others

The saying goes that to understand another person you have to walk a long way in his shoes. Although this is a neat way to say you need to *feel* what being the other person is like, you need to have a good look at your own feet first – walking a few miles in someone else’s shoes may damage his shoes and hurt your own feet into the bargain.

You bring your life experiences, attributes, and ways of thinking and feeling to the helping relationship and have a significant impact on it, both positive and negative. For this reason I frequently explore thoughts about personal development and self-understanding in this book.

Chapter 2 focuses on self-development and ways of taking it further, and Chapter 7 puts the spotlight on your defences, but I refer to your self-understanding throughout. In Chapters 8 and 9, I explain the Core Conditions which are fundamental to the approach of this book. These conditions are key qualities expressed in terms of skills but they’re more than just a skills checklist. Being able to demonstrate the Core Conditions to a help-seeker means developing your self-knowledge and self-awareness.

Working Safely and Ethically

Although working as a listening helper is rewarding, it can pose some challenges and dilemmas and drain you of energy at times. In Chapter 3, I talk about the importance of making sure you take care of yourself and get support for your work. Self-care contributes to being a safe helper.

Another part of working safely is reflecting on what makes for good practice. Helping situations routinely throw up ethical dilemmas. Chapter 4 gets you thinking about your practice, risks, and protective measures, including an ethical decision-making model. Good practice is also informed by research and the influence of research findings is reflected in this book.

Appendix A considers some case studies and ethical dilemmas, while some of the things that can go wrong are explored in Chapter 16. Chapter 15 looks at the influence of your role and setting and prepares you for different types of helping conversation, such as by telephone.

Being a Listening Helper

Think of your development and work as a listening helper as a journey: travelling with a companion in the helping relationship. The vehicle for the trip is

the helping relationship – a safe environment which contains, supports, and conveys the help-seeker to his destination.



Some things you read and hear may trigger uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, so take care of yourself.

Counselling skills are the nuts and bolts, the engine, of the helping relationship, while the fuel is the motivation and energy of both parties in the process. In the helping relationship, you assist the help-seeker to get somewhere by helping him to work out the final destination and how to get there, using your growing understanding of him, of yourself as map-reader and guide, and of the process of the journey. These tasks involve certain skills and knowledge, but most importantly require particular attributes and qualities. You are encouraged to reflect on these in Chapter 6. Reflection is a key part of being a listening helper. You also need to know your role and how being a listening helper may affect you; I explore both these aspects in Chapter 5.



Counselling skills are also referred to as *active listening skills*. 'Active' denotes that the helping relationship is not just about listening, but is concerned with *demonstrating* that you are listening carefully and attentively.

Your journey as a listening helper

The journey, whether as help-seeker or as aspiring or practising listening helper, can be daunting but it is also life-enhancing. As you explore your development as a listening helper, bear in mind that you'll go through a cyclical process:

- ✓ You start with enthusiasm and excitement and blissful ignorance.
- ✓ As you begin to develop, you hit a depressive, under-confident period of realising how much you don't know.
- ✓ As you continue to grow, your confidence starts to return, but in a self-conscious way.
- ✓ You reach the point where you almost instinctively know what to do without constant checking and self-questioning.
- ✓ The cycle begins again every time you challenge yourself with new developments.



You make more progress in this journey if you develop your reflective skills and maintain a regular journal that records your experiences and associated feelings, thoughts, wonderings, and so on. Look back over your writing at intervals to see how your preoccupations have changed and how you have grown. Some people draw, copy, or write poems, paste in articles and cartoons – whatever captures the imagination and emotions.

Using counselling skills or being a counsellor

Although counsellors use counselling skills, being a counsellor and being a listening helper using counselling skills are different, even though the boundary is blurred in some situations. In this book I focus on the listening helper using counselling skills. The differences are to do with a combination of time, focus, boundaries, role, and depth:

- ✓ Counselling skills are usually used as part of another primary role, such as being a teacher, youth worker, welfare worker, advice worker, or working in human resources, for example.
- ✓ Normally counselling skills sessions are short (typically 20–40 minutes) whereas counselling appointments are typically 50 minutes.
- ✓ Counselling skills sessions are less likely to be at regular intervals than counselling and are usually a short-term relationship (although the counselling skills sessions may be part of a wider relationship).
- ✓ Counselling skills are aimed at either simply listening without offering advice, or possibly focused on a specific issue with an expectation of reaching some kind of outcome by the end of the session. Counselling is usually working on underlying issues and less likely to be interested in an immediate outcome.
- ✓ Counselling has clearer boundaries which define certain limits of the relationship, distinguishing it from other relationships. For example, confidentiality and time boundaries are stricter and the counsellor is unlikely to have another relationship with, or dual role, with his client.
- ✓ Normally when you're in a role in which you use counselling skills but you're not being a counsellor, you work at a relatively superficial level. This statement may seem to denigrate the importance of the counselling skills role, which this book is about. However, I say that only to highlight the fact that when you're in the position of using your counselling skills, you generally function in another primary role, such as the aforementioned teacher, welfare worker, and so on, so you can't afford the time and commitment to delve deeper.

If you are interested in continuing your listening helper development by becoming a counsellor, check out Appendix B for more useful information.



An important feature of all listening help is that the helper doesn't offer advice, in the sense of 'If I were you I'd do this'. Knowledge from your primary role or elsewhere may mean you can inform a help-seeker about choices available to him, but never advise someone what to do.

The key skills you need

Helping conversations involve:

- ✓ Engaging the speaker in being comfortable enough to speak openly.
- ✓ Helping the speaker to deepen exploration of the issues he wants to discuss.
- ✓ Enabling the release of emotions.
- ✓ Making sense of the issues.
- ✓ Moving on to deal with the issues.
- ✓ Inviting the client to discuss what is helpful and unhelpful and adapting your approach.

In order to embark on and work through this process, you need to develop not only your personal qualities but also a set of skills that have been identified over many years as being most helpful in the listening helper interaction. Chapter 18 gives you a list of some of these skills, with a brief explanation of each skill and its purpose. To gain a more in-depth understanding of the full range of skills you need, have a look at Part III, which covers them in detail.

Common problems that stop you from listening

However willing and keen you are to listen and be helpful, some things can interrupt your listening. On a practical level, the distractions of a busy or unsuitable environment can do so. You don't always get to choose an ideal situation, but you can pay some attention to minimising or avoiding distractions. You'll find discussion of such distractions in Chapter 7.

You can also suffer from practical internal distractions, such as being hungry, thirsty, or needing the toilet.

You can be disrupted from careful listening by worries such as being unsure what to say next, not knowing anything about the specific topic the help-seeker has brought up, or panic about disclosures that have been made.

People tend to carry around prejudices, assumptions, and needs (such as the need to be liked or seen to be competent) that can interfere with their ability to really listen. I talk more on this subject in Chapter 2 and in Chapter 7 I expand on the discussion of defences, which protect people from difficult feelings and may make them miss the help-seeker's emotions. Defences are an aspect of our unconscious processes and I say more about this in Chapter 12.

Increasing your knowledge, skills, and self-awareness through the information in this book can help to improve your confidence and therefore progress your ability to concentrate without distraction. Having a structure to guide you is also helpful.

Beginnings, Middles, and Ends: Structuring the Conversation

This book uses a three-stage model to guide you through the process of the helping conversation. I give you an outline of the model in Chapter 6, and then expand on that model in Part III. In a nutshell the model divides the process into beginning, middle, and end, corresponding to *Exploration*, *Understanding*, and *Action* respectively. Holding this structure in mind can help steer you through the time you have with a help-seeker, both for an individual session and for a series of meetings.

In Chapter 8 you have a section on making a contract with the help-seeker which clarifies your role and responsibilities as a listening helper. You will feel more secure if you have made a contract and have a structure in mind.

Understanding Others

Understanding yourself is a good preparation for understanding others. Although you are a unique individual, you share some very common themes in human experience and share the same gamut of emotions with everyone else. However, everyone arrives in this world with different strengths and vulnerabilities and is subjected to various personal, social, educational, and relationship experiences and events which shape his or her capacities to cope, or not.

Being prepared for common personal problems

In this book I use a model that attempts to capture the range of human experience using an acronym, BEST-I BEST-RU. Like all models this one aims to assist your thinking, but is undoubtedly incomplete. Use your own experience and what you know of the experiences of others to compare with the information you find in this book. The initials of the acronym stand for *Body*,

Emotion, Sensation, Thinking, Imagery, Behaviour, Environment, Spirituality, Time, and Relationships and I encourage you to view people in their context. Check out Chapter 12 for a description of this model.

Other chapters that aim to prepare you for dealing with the everyday problems you may encounter as a listening helper are Chapters 13 and 14, which look at people's social and psychological experiences.

Chapter 11 focuses on the ending phase of the helping–relationship, which means that it considers how to encourage action and also looks at the meaning of endings and transitions, which are intrinsic to many problems people come for help with. Although I can't cover everything in this book, I can tell you that the bounds of human distress are wide. Read, talk to people, and watch television programmes to broaden your knowledge and understanding of what can distress people.

Spotting signs of stress and distress

Many people who seek help from listening helpers, especially counsellors, have identified that they are distressed. Most often people hide the true extent of their distress for various reasons – embarrassment, not wanting to make a fuss, protecting others, and so on. I see people's emotions as being like an iceberg – nine-tenths submerged and hidden from view. Many listening helpers find that they are the first person to notice that someone is struggling or needs to talk. Perhaps you are reading about counselling skills because this happens to you all the time. Being sensitive to signs and symptoms of stress and distress in yourself is one way of developing your sensitivity to others.

Chapter 12 explores signs and symptoms. Chapters 13 and 14 are on social and psychological understanding, and the case studies in Appendix A all help to develop your sensitivity.

Coping with different types of conversation

As a listening helper with another primary role, you may find yourself facing a potentially wide variety of helping conversations, planned and unplanned, sometimes with conscripts rather than volunteers, all influenced by your setting or context. Conversations are mostly face-to-face but they may be mediated by telephone or other electronic means. Chapter 16 explores some of the issues connected with these different situations.

Exploring Counselling Further

You have no end to the information and skills development that will prove helpful to you to develop and grow as a listening helper. Chapter 18 focuses on resources such as the professional bodies where you can obtain general relevant information and guidelines, including how to take your development forward if you want to train as a counsellor. Chapter 19 describes some books, and their authors, that will further your understanding. In Appendix B, I give details about becoming a counsellor, some of the things you need to think about, and how to go about training.