

COUNSELING INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

WHAT DISTINGUISHES A *PROFESSIONAL* FROM OTHER KINDS OF WORKERS?

- Education and training
- Higher standards of practice
- But the most critical difference may be a *lifetime commitment to self-criticism* and soliciting criticism from others for the sake of increasing professional knowledge and skill.
- In the best professional practice, sensitivity and embarrassment about one's mistakes are considered a luxury and a waste of time.
- It's generally understood that the shared objective of mutual criticism is not finding fault but to take the steps necessary to *avoid repeating mistakes*.
- So a couple of principles in this regard:
 1. You should recognize that mistakes in practice are inevitable, but that repeating them is not.
 2. The mistake is not *you* or any other *person*.
 3. The mistake is a *decision* that was made or an *action* that was taken, which could have been more productive, more helpful, more enlightening, etc.

BEFORE YOU START, IT MAY BE USEFUL TO CONSIDER THE PURPOSE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT.

- Clearly the goal is *not* to see if you can conduct a professional counseling interview.
- That would be absurd and unfair under the circumstances—you're just beginning to learn about the theory and practice of social work.
- So what is the purpose?
- To introduce you to what might be called the *infrastructure* of a generic counseling interview.
- The idea is that you begin to *internalize* some of the basic steps.
- In time, of course, with more education, training, and experience, you'll learn to carry out these steps effectively.
- So let's review some of these steps and some objectives in relation to them.

WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF MAKING INTRODUCTIONS AT THE BEGINNING OF A COUNSELING INTERVIEW?

- You want to make sure that the person is not feeling awkward because of not knowing how to address you.
- You want to *humanize* yourself:

1. Of course, you think of yourself as a sensitive, caring person.
 2. But clients may only see you as a potential source of embarrassment or threat in some way—in effect, imagining you as two-dimensional, somehow not human in the same way they experience themselves.
 3. So an introduction, to be effective, involves more than quickly stating your name.
- What more do you imagine you might do when introducing yourself?
 1. You might say, “My name is _____, please call me _____.”
 2. You might be sure to make eye contact and smile.
 3. Make some sort of physical contact, such as a handshake.
 4. You might make an effort to use a warm tone of voice.
 5. You might ask the client, “How do you like to be called?”
 6. You might share something personal but innocuous about yourself, such as: “Sorry to have kept you waiting—I had another flat tire today!” or “Please excuse my office—they’re painting again this week, so we’re living with chaos!”
 - The goal, once again, is to convey your humanity to the client.

WHY MIGHT WE WANT TO BEGIN A COUNSELING INTERVIEW WITH SMALL TALK?

- Not uncommonly when a client comes to a counseling or therapy session for the first time, he or she may be feeling anything from mild concern to overwhelming anxiety.
- A not uncommon way of dealing with those feelings is to close oneself off, which may be revealed in body language, awkwardness in speech, veiled resistance to answering questions, etc.
- So of course, small talk is a way to help the client put those emotions and thoughts aside initially, focusing on something trivial or entirely inconsequential.
- How do you make small talk without being inauthentic?
- What are the essentials of making small talk?
 1. A desire to make a *personal* connection with the client.
 2. Sufficient interest in doing so to invest in looking for the basis of such a connection, even if it’s only a comment about the weather or traffic or the frustration of traveling by bus in the city.
 3. A willingness to share your interest, emotion, enthusiasm—as appropriate to the conversation.
 4. Having in mind a simple way to transition to the business of the session.

WHAT’S WRONG WITH BEGINNING A COUNSELING SESSION BY ASKING A CLIENT, “HOW ARE YOU TODAY?”

- It tends to elicit answers such as, “Fine—how are you?”

- So now that you've established that everyone is fine, the counseling session can be cancelled.
- The problem, of course, is that everything is *not* fine, and your goal is to facilitate the client revealing the "presenting problem" as quickly as possible.
- When you begin by eliciting an answer such as, "Just fine," you're one down, having created a kind of client momentum in the wrong direction.
- You have put the client in the position of having to contradict him or herself by acknowledging that everything is *not* fine.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEGINNING A COUNSELING SESSION BY ASKING A CLIENT "IS EVERYTHING FINE?"

- It can be responded to with a one-word answer, "Yes."
- For the most part, we want to ask questions that do *not* lend themselves to yes or no answers, but that cause clients to reveal information about themselves and their situations.
- For example: "What's happening at home?"
- But then that question can be improved by making it more specific: "What's happening at home between you and your husband?"
- Or more specifically: "What kinds of things do you and your wife fight about—tell me about your most recent fight."

ONE OF THE FIRST OBJECTIVES WE HAVE IN A COUNSELING INTERVIEW IS TO IDENTIFY THE "PRESENTING PROBLEM."

- Knowing the *presenting problem*—we're talking about the "concern" that prompted the person to seek or be referred for counseling—determines or helps you to determine the initial direction you want your questions to take in the session.
- In a situation where a young woman, old enough to be living on her own, is using marijuana, and she is told by her parents to quit or move out: What's the presenting problem and why?
 1. Is it her drug use?
 2. Is it her relationship with her parents?
 3. Is it her inability to support herself economically?
 4. Is it something else?
- What should the interviewer initially focus on in that situation?
- Clearly one possibility in that situation would be to focus on the young woman's relationship with her parents.
- If you believed that was the most productive focus, how might you approach it?
 1. You might ask her to *enact* or at least describe a typical argument with her parents.
 2. What's the difference between *enacting* and *describing*?
 3. What might be gained by having her enact an argument with her parents?

- Does the client always know the presenting problem that led him or her to the counseling session—that is, is it necessarily clear and specific in the client’s mind.
- And if not, how are you going to discover it—what kinds of questions might you ask?
- What’s the difference between the following two questions?
 1. Is there something you would like to talk about today?
 2. Why are you seeking counseling *now*, given that the problem you describe has been going on for several years?

ONCE THE PRESENTING PROBLEM HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED, IT’S LIKELY THAT YOU’RE GOING TO WANT TO KNOW THE “HISTORICAL DATA” RELATED TO THE PROBLEM.

- So in a situation where a client indicates that the presenting problem is “stress,” the next task is to “drill down” to discover the particular circumstances of his or her stress.
- What kinds of questions might you ask in this regard?
 1. Do you remember a time when you didn’t feel a lot of stress in your day-to-day life?
 2. When did your life begin to feel more stressful?
 3. What are the specific times or situations that currently feel stressful?
 4. What’s going on in those situations and who are the protagonists?
 5. How would you describe your relationship with. . . . ?
 6. What do you do practically to deal with the stress?
 7. Do you have allies in dealing with stressful situations?
 8. Have you learned any particular lessons that you regularly apply to deal with stress?
- Is a client necessarily clear on how he or she deals with stress?

OBVIOUSLY, WE WANT TO KNOW ABOUT A CLIENT’S FEELINGS, BUT IN WHAT REGARD?

- Let’s say you’re dealing with a client who’s in an abusive relationship.
- She says her husband is physically, verbally, and emotionally battering her.
- She also says she would like to move out and end the marriage, but she’s economically dependent on him, certainly couldn’t support herself and her two children if she moved out, and doesn’t want to leave her children with a violent man.
- In what regard are you interested in her feelings?
- At what point might you inquire about them?

ONCE YOU’VE CLARIFIED THE PRESENTING PROBLEM AND THE BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM, YOU’RE GOING TO BE LOOKING TO

IDENTIFY WHAT PERSONAL AND RELATIONAL RESOURCES THE CLIENT HAS.

- This line of inquiry builds on some of the strengths-based questions just mentioned regarding allies and lessons learned.
- What questions might you ask to discover a client's support systems and relational resources?
 1. Tell me about your family.
 2. Are you a member of a church and, if so, what do you value in that connection?
 3. How would you describe your social life, particularly your circle of friends?

YOU WANT TO RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO GIVE A LOT OF ADVICE EARLY-ON, ESPECIALLY IF THE CLIENT HASN'T SOLICITED IT.

- Exceptions *may* be when you're asked a specific question.
- But even then you may want to encourage the client to take initiative and to discourage unnecessary and unhealthy dependency on you.
- The question, of course, is this: How do you know when to be directive and when not to be?
- My answer to that question is based on a *learning model* in which it is assumed that, at any moment, there is one learning-partner who is more knowing and one who is less knowing, with three "intervention" options open to the more knowing partner:
 1. Ask a question, which assumes that the momentarily less-knowing partner has *extensive resources* of all kinds (intellectual, cultural, psychological, emotional, social, biological, and certainly spiritual and religious);
 2. Propose options, which assumes that the momentarily less-knowing partner has *moderate resources*; or
 3. Make a statement, which assumes that the momentarily less-knowing partner is almost entirely *without resources*.
- When in doubt, I give the client the benefit of the doubt, assuming that he or she has sufficient resources to answer questions that encourage taking initiative.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN DONE DIFFERENTLY IN THE INTERVIEW WITH THE PARENT WHO WAS SEEKING HELP FOR HER CHILD'S OBESITY?

- Much more could have been learned about the background of the problem?
- Why was the suggestion to begin organizing in the community problematic?
 1. It offered no near-term relief for the immediate problem.
 2. There was no understanding of what was required by the advice.
 3. The client had virtually no likelihood of success in such an endeavor under the circumstances.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS AN APPROPRIATE *INITIAL* RESPONSE WHEN A CLIENT SAYS, “I FEEL STUCK” OR THE EQUIVALENT IN REGARD TO SOME LIFE-SITUATION?

- One approach is to make what I call fix-it statements:
 1. There’s really no basis for you to feel that way—it’s all in your imagination.
 2. Here’s what you can do to get unstuck. . . .
- What’s wrong with this approach in most cases? [IT INFANTILIZES MANY CLIENTS, SHORT-CIRCUITING THEIR DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-HELP SKILLS.]
- Another approach is the options question:
 1. What do you see as your options?
 2. What do you think you might do differently?
- What’s wrong with this approach in many cases? [THE CLIENT IS STUCK AND HAS COME TO YOU TO *GET* ALTERNATIVES.]
- In many cases, the most productive approach is to ask questions that give the client a basis for analyzing his or her situation—for example:
 1. What specifically are the conditions and situations in which you feel stuck, and who are the other people involved in them?
 2. Where were you when you had your last anxiety attack, who were you with, what was happening just prior to the attack, etc.?

WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR WHEN WE ASK A CLIENT, “WHAT HAVE YOU TRIED TO DEAL WITH THIS SITUATION?”

- This question can reflect several possibilities:
 1. It can simply represent practical problem-solving
 2. It can represent an attempt to discover how resourceful the client is when faced with a challenging situation
 3. It can be to help the client see how he or she engaged in self-destructive attitudes or behaviors as a means of coping with challenging situations
- So, on the front-end, before asking the question we need to know why we’re asking it—that is, we need to know what we need to know, whether it would be more helpful at that moment to focus on:
 1. Problem-solving
 2. Appraisal of client resources
 3. Promoting client insight into self-destructive behavior

QUESTIONS TO CLIENTS OFTEN ONLY WORK IF YOU AS A COUNSELOR OR THERAPIST CAN TOLERATE SILENCE.

- Many times the questions we ask clients require that we give them time to answer adequately:
 1. Questions that relate to the *specific circumstances* of situations that may have occurred some time ago may not be easy to answer instantaneously.

2. Questions that relate to how a client *feels* may not be easy to answer honestly in a New York minute.
 3. Questions that entail *value conflicts*, *competing loyalties*, or *ambivalence* about relationships may also require time to answer.
- To the extent that as counselors we're uncomfortable with silence, we short-circuit answers by filling them in for the client or simply moving on to other questions or subjects.
 - The rule about asking questions is this: Once you've asked the question, shut up.
 1. Allow the client to answer the question, even if it takes a minute or two.
 2. Don't speak until *after* the client does.

COUNSELING INTERVIEW VIDEO GRADING KEY

- Introductions (5)
- Small talk (5)
- Question(s) about concerns (5)
- Questions about feelings (5)
- Exploration of concerns in-depth (5)
- Question about what client has tried (5)
- Question whether client has thought about specific possibilities (5)
- Not giving advice (5)