Developing a Personal Approach

- How do you become an effective counsellor?
- What are the moral and ethical values that a counsellor must explore?
- How does a counsellor develop a personal approach to their work and clients?

This book provides a series of reflective learning tasks to support counsellors through key stages in training. Linking to the best selling Open University Press textbook *An Introduction to Counselling*, John McLeod offers a range of thoughtful exercises enabling counsellors to build on life experience, engage with theories and concepts, reflect on cases, learn from critical issues in practice, and develop a professional identity. Readers are encouraged to construct a rich account of their counselling competencies, concepts, values and personal qualities. Learning tasks are cross-referenced to pages in *An Introduction to Counselling*, and other key sources.

This book contributes to the process of becoming an effective counsellor by:
- Enabling consolidation of personal learning and development
- Facilitating the integration of theory, practice and personal experience
- Providing arenas for collaborative dialogue and exploration with fellow trainees

The Counsellor’s Workbook is an invaluable resource for counselling students, tutors and trainers, and for experienced practitioners engaging in continuing professional development. It promotes an integrative approach to counselling, which emphasises the core relational and personal dimensions of all therapeutic work and can be used in conjunction with other books or as a stand-alone text.

John McLeod is Professor of Counselling at the University of Abertay Dundee, having previously taught at Keele University and Wolverhampton University. He has practised in a range of counselling settings, as well as being involved in training, research and consultancy with many occupational groups, including nurses, social workers and emergency services personnel. He is the author of six books and more than fifty articles and chapters on various aspects of counselling and psychotherapy.

The Counsellor’s Workbook
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John McLeod
This is the first edition of the Workbook. Any feedback or comments regarding how you have used the book with your classes, and your suggestions for improving it next time (the email address for the workbook is: helpline_maidenhead@mcgraw-hill.com) will be gratefully received. One of the potential lines of development for the workbook would be to adapt some of it for on-line delivery over the Internet. If you are interested in such a development, then let us know.
How to use the Workbook

Introduction
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The basic assumptions informing the design of this Workbook
Contemporary psychotherapy proposes a framework of theory within which the practitioner may, to a certain degree, reveal ordinary human qualities. By contrast I would suggest that psychotherapy is the manifestation of creative human qualities in a facilitating setting, in which the task of healing is eased by a critical knowledge of the theories and techniques of twentieth-century practitioners.

(Lomas, 1981: 3)

…the actual techniques employed by the therapists are of lesser importance than the unique character and personality of the therapists themselves. Therapists select techniques and theories because of who they are as persons: therapy strategies are manifestations of the therapist’s personality. The therapist as a person is the instrument of primary influence in the therapy enterprise. A corollary of this principle is that the more a therapist accepts and values himself, or herself, the more effective he or she will be in helping clients come to know and appreciate themselves.

(McConnaughy, 1987: 304)

…in the end, each therapist develops his or her own style, and the ‘theoretical orientation’ falls into the background. What remains salient is a unique personality combining artistry and skill. In this respect, a fine therapist closely resembles a painter, novelist or composer. As is true in all the arts and sciences, few reach the summit.

(Strupp, 1978: 31)

More and more, as time has gone by, I have thought that the usual way of training is not satisfactory in that it does not give enough weight to the general way a person behaves and thinks and feels toward someone who is distressed, to the experience of being with people and of getting as much help as possible from colleagues and supervisors. There is too much stress placed on working with particular techniques … I think therapy is very much a personal affair. It is not wise to try to make clones of people by making them Freudians or whatever. Student therapists have to find their own way of being with people that will help them. One can expose them to all sorts of marvellous [theorists], and it will do them a lot of good, but that is not the business. The business is to do with finding their own way, using their own intuition, learning to be themselves in the presence of someone who is asking for help, who is probably putting all kinds of pressures on them.

(Lomas, 1999: 25).

Introduction

Welcome to The Counsellor’s Workbook: Developing a Personal Approach. This Workbook has been designed as a resource to be used in conjunction with a textbook (McLeod, An Introduction to Counselling 2003) during a particular period within your development as a counsellor. For most people who become counsellors, or who develop a counselling dimension within roles such as nurse or teacher, there is a period of typically three or four years when they undergo intensive learning and training activities. Even if this training is ‘part-time’, with the person continuing to fulfil other ongoing work and caring roles, it is usual for the person to become fully immersed in the whole process of becoming a counsellor: reading widely, reflecting on relationships with trainers/tutors and fellow learners, making sense of what emerges from personal therapy or groupwork, and seeing clients under supervision for the first time. An Introduction to Counselling is a book that has been written to be used at the onset of that journey: it provides a map of the territory. The workbook has been created as a tool for further personal exploration of the ground mapped by An Introduction to Counselling. The exercises and questions in the Workbook reflect the themes discussed in An Introduction to Counselling, and are intended as pointers: they suggest where to look, but not what to find.
To be a good counsellor, it is necessary to develop a way of being with people that is genuinely grounded in your own personal experience, values, and cultural context. Over and over again, research studies have found that what makes a difference to clients are the personal qualities of the counsellor, and his or her capacity to form an accepting and facilitative relationship. The Workbook has therefore been organized around a series of reflective learning tasks, which invite you to explore aspects of your own life that are relevant to your capacity to offer an effective counselling relationship to others. The aim is to help you to get inside the various ideas and approaches that exist within the domain of counselling.

The Workbook gives you an opportunity to document, in your own way, the learning process you are experiencing at a significant phase of your personal development. What you write may be useful for you in terms of essays or reports you write during a training course. It may open up issues that you might wish to work on with a counsellor or therapist. It will also be able to help you to decide what you want to do next – what further training or work possibilities are right for you.

Learning to offer a counselling relationship

There are three key aspects of learning about counselling. These are:

- Self-awareness;
- Understanding the counselling process;
- Practical experience.

Accurate and sensitive self-awareness underpins any type of counselling work. No matter what approach to counselling is being used, the main instrument for delivering help or therapy is the person or the counsellor himself or herself. To be a counsellor involves interacting with the person seeking help in a flexible and responsive way. There is no fixed script that a counsellor can follow: almost everything a counsellor does is improvised in the moment. It is essential, therefore, for a counsellor to be able to use him or herself as a resource: to be sensitive to the possible significance of shifts in internal feeling states, to have a sense of how his or her actions might be perceived by another person, to have strategies for staying fresh and alert. Effective counselling builds on the quality of the relationship between the helper and the person being helped, and being a counsellor frequently stretches and challenges a helper’s capacity to relate: to cope with endings, confrontation, the experience of deep caring, the intricacy of unravelling impasses. In recognition of these factors, all counselling incorporates an element of work on self, for example participating in experiential groupwork, gaining the experience of being a client, or keeping a personal reflective journal. Throughout the Workbook you will find that you are invited to write about yourself, to reflect on your own experience and hopefully to gain new insights into yourself. It is important to experience this process (not only through the medium of a workbook but also through being a client yourself at some point in your life), because this is the process that anyone receiving counselling goes through.

In addition to self-awareness, it is necessary for counsellors to develop a framework for understanding what they are doing. There has been much debate about whether it is
better for counsellors to stick to one theoretical model (e.g. the person-centred approach of Carl Rogers, or a Freudian psychodynamic approach), or whether it is more effective to piece together an integrated personal model from the various theories that are around. It seems that either of these strategies can work, but that what is crucial as a counsellor is to use concepts and ideas that are coherent and make sense to you, and that you can communicate to the people you are trying to help. The importance of developing a robust framework for understanding really stems from the fact that, quite often, people who come for counselling are confused and confusing. They have exhausted their immediate problem-solving resources such as friends and family. They may be in crisis and feel that everything is chaotic and out of control. They may well be afraid of what they feel is happening to them. And they may, one way or another, push all this stuff on to the counsellor: ‘here, you deal with all this chaos, fear and confusion’. It is at this point that a counsellor needs to feel secure in his or her grasp of reality. The Workbook, as a consequence, includes many tasks that are intended to give you opportunities to piece together and test out your evolving framework for understanding.

The third key element of counselling training or learning, which goes hand in hand with self-awareness and developing a framework for understanding, is that of practical experience. There are three types of practical experience that are particularly relevant. The first involves simply sharing your personal experience with others, and hearing about their experiences. The second type of practical experience concerns practising your counselling and helping skills on and with fellow learners. The third form of practical experience involves being in a real counselling role with someone who has come for help with their problems. This Workbook cannot directly enable you to develop your practical experience. It can give you a chance to reflect on some of your personal experience, but if you want to learn to be competent as a counsellor, or as a user of counselling skills and approaches, then you need to find a situation where you can spend many hours acquiring practical experience. When learning the practice of counselling, it is absolutely essential to be a member of a small peer learning group which meets often enough for a climate of trust and honesty to be created, and in which you can be supported as well as challenged, and can learn to give and receive feedback. Being able to draw upon the knowledge and expertise of a tutor or trainer is important too, to provide guidelines and standards and to model good practice. Many of the learning tasks in the workbook lend themselves to exploration in a small group setting. The depth and sustainability of the learning that you can achieve through using the Workbook will be multiplied many times if you are able to reflect on and explore at least some of the learning tasks in the context of an on-going group.

Using the Workbook

There are more than 80 learning tasks and activities in this Workbook. There is no need to feel that you have to try them all. Some of the tasks may introduce areas of self-reflection, contemplation and dialogue with others that may expand to fill many hours of your time. Other tasks may seem uninteresting, trivial, or evoke a response of ‘not yet’. Yet other tasks may stimulate you to read and think around the topic, in advance of tackling the learning activities. It is important to trust your own gut feeling, regarding the best direction for your learning at any one time. This is also, possibly,
one of the primary rules of counselling: the client’s readiness to explore any particular issue is a factor that is taken into account by all the main approaches to counselling (although in different ways). The Workbook has been written as a resource that can be useful for counsellors with different interests and needs, so it is inevitable that there will be some activities that are more relevant for you, while others are less relevant.

The structure of the Workbook is designed to have a beginning and an end. The activities in Section 1 are intended to allow you to explore and honour your own experience and knowledge as a person who can engage constructively and helpfully with others who need to talk about their problems. It is essential that you complete at least four or five of the activities in this section before you attempt to begin working with any of the other sections, or before you even look at the exercises in these later sections. There are several activities in later sections, for example, that invite you to reflect theoretically on aspects of your personal story, that you have written in response to the tasks in Section 1. It is best to have already completed as many of your ‘personal stories’ as possible in an intuitive, expressive, open and spontaneous manner, rather than writing them with half a mind to how they might be interpreted.

The activities in the final section, on integration and expressing your professional identity, are intended to be completed during the latter stages of your use of the Workbook. These are activities that invite you to bring together and review themes and ideas from earlier sections.

The activities in the middle sections – theory, practice and cases – can be taken in any order. Although the Workbook is linked throughout to An Introduction to Counselling, it does not follow the textbook page by page or even chapter by chapter. Instead, the Workbook tries to give you an opportunity to think about themes and issues that weave through all of the chapters.

Some practical suggestions

The Workbook is designed as a series of learning tasks, each of which will generate written material. It is recommended that you write or paste what you write into a portfolio or journal, which could be in the form of a paper notebook, ringbinder or files in a folder on your PC. If you are keeping this work in a notebook or binder, it may be useful to include a photocopy of the exercise, so that when you look again in the future at what you have written, you can see the instructions or guidelines to which it was a response.

Many counselling courses require students or trainees to keep personal learning diaries or journals, because it has been found that this is an excellent way of helping people to explore personal experience, reflect on experience, and integrate theory and practice. A learning journal also makes it possible to keep track of personal change and development, and to keep hold of new insights (by writing them down) rather than losing them through forgetting. There is also a lot of evidence that writing can in itself be therapeutic (at some point in the future you may want to suggest to some of your counselling clients that they might want to keep journals). Section 1 of the Workbook offers some guidelines for writing a personal journal. If you are using the Workbook in conjunction with a personal journal, it is useful to give a date and title to each entry, and to make sure that what you write is kept in a safe place (if you are worried about
someone else reading your journal, chances are that you will be less free in what you write).

The Workbook deliberately does not specify how long each task might take, or how much written material it might generate.

There are no right or wrong answers – what is important is what you learn.

Working alone and with others

All of the tasks included in the Workbook are primarily designed to promote individual learning, through personal reflection and writing. This emphasis on person or individual learning is a requirement in any counselling learning programme, and reflects the centrality of self-awareness in counselling. The majority of the activities in the Workbook involve periods of sustained reflection on personally significant topics. There is a great deal that can be learned from this. However, working with other people on these tasks introduces important additional opportunities for learning:

- The experience of what it is like to share your feelings and thoughts, and your ‘story’, with others – for example, how risky does this seem to be, are there things you could say but hold back on?
- The response of other people to what you have said – do they appear to be interested, involved, shocked, surprised . . .? When others ask questions about what you have offered them, do these trigger new ways of looking at the issue?
- Observing and listening to your colleagues sharing their responses to the learning activities – in what ways might this broaden your appreciation of the range of possible perspectives that there might be on an issue?

It can be very helpful, therefore, to have a learning partner or partners, or to be a part of a group, with whom the issues raised by this Workbook can be shared and explored. Such learning alliances may be facilitated by a trainer or tutor (for example, as part of a training course) or may be organized on a peer group basis. In either case, there are ground rules which should be discussed, understood and adhered to. The existence of confidentiality is a necessary element: it can be destructive and damaging if personal information that is shared in the context of this type of learning is passed on to others without permission (even if for the best of intentions). The existence of respect is also necessary – people learn best at their own pace, and when the conditions are right for them.

Taking responsibility and taking care of yourself

Some of the learning tasks in the Workbook invite you to explore intimate and sensitive parts of your own life. Some of the tasks ask you to write about things that maybe you have never told anyone else, or are emotionally painful.

When using the Workbook, remember that:

- You are responsible for your own learning. If a task does not appeal to you, or seems threatening, then don’t do it. It is your choice;
You don’t have to show anyone else what you have written unless you decide to. No-one has the right to see what you have written. It’s up to you to share what you are comfortable sharing;

Keep what you write in a safe place;

If there is anything in the Workbook that disturbs you, then it may be helpful to talk it over in confidence with a friend or colleague, a tutor (if you are enrolled on a counselling course), or with a counsellor or spiritual advisor. If you find yourself coming back to a Workbook topic, in your own mind, days after writing about it, then this may be a signal that it has raised a significant issue which may repay discussion with another person.

Your experience of using this Workbook may mirror the experience of being a client in counselling. There may be times when you avoid the Workbook or ‘forget’ about it. There may be other times when you tackle learning tasks with great energy.

Building a portfolio of experiences and reflections

The Workbook is intended to help you to work towards developing competence as a counsellor, by accumulating a portfolio of notes, stories, and ideas which you can use to inform your thinking about counselling and your confidence in what you bring to the counselling relationship. This portfolio may supplement a learning journal or diary that you keep, or it may be quite separate.

In all likelihood, your assumptions about counselling are implicit rather than explicit. In other words, you may have a ‘gut feeling’ that some approaches and techniques are better than others (at least for you, or in your work context), but it may be hard to put into words exactly where you stand, and why. The learning tasks in the Workbook give you opportunities to put these ideas into words.

*It is essential, in using the Workbook, that you actually take the time to write down your responses to tasks.* The process of writing will help you to articulate or ‘sort out’ your ideas in a focused way. Recording your reflections in writing also makes it possible to add more, later. It allows you to reflect on what you have written, and to ‘de-centre’ yourself. Writing also enables you to reflect on how you may have changed, or on the different ‘voices’ or feeling states that appear in your words.

The portfolio will give you a rich supply of experiences and reflections which will help you to explore and define many different aspects of yourself as a counsellor. By the end of your involvement with the workbook, your portfolio could contain:

- Your responses to the learning tasks provided in the Workbook;
- Material from exercises that may have been used on courses or workshops you have attended;
- Notes or excerpts you have taken from books and articles you have read, which are relevant to the task of mapping out your own personal understanding of counselling;
- Copies of web pages that have been of interest to you;
- Personal reflections.
The Workbook is envisaged as a way of supporting your learning about counselling, through providing a structured way of exploring, recording and analysing key dimensions of your counselling competence. When you have completed training, or moved from a period of learning into a stage in which practice has the predominant call on your time and energy, the pressure to record so much information will not be so great. Although you may well find that you have got into the habit of writing about yourself, and building your personal portfolio, you will probably also find that it has mutated into a style and format that is uniquely your own (like your counselling style!).

It is not helpful to view the Workbook as a self-contained exercise – it should connect with other facets of your learning and practice. Some suggested ways of using your Workbook and portfolio are:

- Identifying what you are good at and what you need to work on. During training you will get lots of opportunities to practice on and with colleagues, or discuss issues. What you write in the Workbook can help you to be clear about what would be best for you to focus on. For example, perhaps you can see entries in your Workbook which show over and over again that you have difficulty with challenging people, or with ending relationships. These are maybe key areas for further work, because they are so critical to being a good counsellor;

- Building up a pool of ideas and insights that you can draw on when writing articles, giving talks, or for coursework essays, case studies and other assignments;

- Integrating what you have learned in personal therapy, experiential groups, and supervision. During training, people often spend a lot of time and effort on their personal therapy or supervision, but find it difficult to link up this learning with their theoretical framework, or their practice;

- Helping you to be clear about the issues you might want to explore in personal therapy or supervision;

- Being clear about who you are and what you do. Developing a professional identity. When you are interviewed for a job, or if you work in a setting where you need to give clients a leaflet describing your approach, you need to sum up your style and qualities as a counsellor in a few words. Some of the Workbook tasks may help you to clarify your career direction;

- As a source of support. Becoming a counsellor can be a stressful or even harrowing business. For example, clients or fellow trainees may give you feedback that is hard to take on board. A learning journal or portfolio is a place where you can begin to look at what they have said, and how you feel, and make some sense of it;

- Some learning tasks help you to build up information about local resources that you can use in your role as a counsellor, for example various agencies and facilities that you might suggest that your clients make use of, or details of self-help books, articles and leaflets that clients might find helpful.

These are just some of the more obvious ways of using the Workbook during your period of learning about counselling. What is important is not to see the process of using this Workbook as a chore or empty ritual, but to keep in mind the advantages of gradually building up a portfolio of your knowledge, practice and achievements.
The basic assumptions informing the design of this Workbook

The exercises and guidelines provided in the Workbook reflect a set of assumptions about what counselling is about, and what is involved in becoming a good counsellor. The assumptions about the nature of counselling, which have also informed the writing on the accompanying textbook, *An Introduction to Counselling*, can be summarized as:

- There is no single approach to counselling that is more effective or valid than any other. There is clinical and research evidence that supports (and is critical of) all of the established therapeutic approaches. In a professional environment in which a plurality of approaches are applied, and where a counsellor may find herself working alongside colleagues representing a wide array of models, it is essential to be familiar with the principal ideas of all of the mainstream approaches;
- Effective counselling is largely dependent on the personal qualities of the counsellor, such as his or her capacity to form a connection with the client, the possession of a model of practice that he or she has worked out for him/herself, and a sufficient degree of consistency between his or her therapeutic approach and who he or she is as a person;
- At the heart of counselling is the opportunity it provides for the person to tell (and re-tell) their story, to a listener who will be curious, sensitive and accepting. Good counsellors are people who tune into the rich meaningfulness of the stories that other people tell, and are able to draw on an appreciation of the meaningfulness of their own life story;
- Counselling is a highly moral activity, and requires a genuine commitment to truth, honesty and a valuing of relationship and conviviality;
- Counselling is an activity that is much wider than the work of counsellors. Most of the time, people who need to talk find themselves a suitable friend, health worker, teacher or clergy.

The main assumption being made within the Workbook about the process of becoming a counsellor, is that learning about counselling is most effective when it builds on personal experience, and recognizes the existing knowledges, skills and personal qualities of the learner. There is a sequence of learning which is reproduced in this Workbook which begins by inviting exploration and documentation of an area of personal experience, then moves into reflection on the potential meaning or significance of that experience, then makes links with theory and research, before finally giving consideration to implications for practice.

Beyond this emphasis on the importance of developing a *personal* approach, is the idea that being a person involves being *in relation* with others, and that – ultimately – building a personal approach can only be done with the help and collaboration of other people. In terms of becoming a counsellor, there are some relationships that appear to be more or less essential:

- Being a member of a peer group which offers support and challenge, over an extended period of time, from a basis of equality of status;
- Having contact with mentors – more experienced members of the profession –