Counselling

The Skills of Finding Solutions to Problems

Robert Manthei

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Robert Manthei

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Preface

What is this book about?

This book describes counselling as the intentional use of skills in the process of helping others to identify and implement solutions to their problems. The approach taken is primarily practical rather than theoretical and has been designed to give readers numerous opportunities to practise skills, consider and reflect on ideas and concepts, and to integrate new learning into their previous knowledge about counselling. Numerous exercises have been provided to aid this process.

Counselling: the skills of finding solutions to problems combines micro-counselling skills and two models of counselling (problem-solving and solution-focused) in a way that will enable counsellors to know, understand and clearly describe what they are doing with clients. The result is a generic model of counselling that tends to accelerate the process of client change; is respectful of clients' abilities and wishes; is optimistic in its orientation, and is reality-based in that it seeks solutions to client problems that enable them to cope better in their daily lives rather than 'self-actualise' to a higher level, though that too may occur.

The material in the book is presented as a sound and broadly-based orientation to the practice of professional counselling. It represents *one* phase of a professional counsellor's learning and development.

Whom is it for?

The book has been written for people in a variety of roles and work settings: those new to counselling and seeking basic or initial training, experienced counsellors wanting to extend their learning, social workers, community workers, social service volunteers, rehabilitation workers, medical personnel, speech and language therapists, and counsellor educators. The book has been written in simple, straightforward language that makes the process of counselling accessible and understandable to experienced and inexperienced helpers alike.

How the book was developed

The book was derived from the author's more than twenty years' experience as a counsellor educator, the last six of which have been spent teaching the approach described in this book, a model which integrates problem-solving and solution-finding. It has always been my belief that the process of counselling

should be demystified and that the skills should be shared widely with people both inside and outside of the profession. Therefore, I have made every effort to present a model of helping that is clear, easy to teach and learn, encouraging of critical reflection and analysis, effective with and respectful of clients, and one that produces results with clients that are readily assessible. The result, I think, provides counsellors with a clear 'road map' to guide their work and a solid foundation upon which to build future learning and self-development as a counsellor.

Students trained in this model have reported the following sequence of development:

- at first they are reluctant to give up focusing on client problems and working in ways that are largely intuitive and feel right;
- initially they find that learning discrete skills feels awkward and disruptive to their natural, intuitive styles;
- however, as they learn more about the skills of problem solving and finding solutions to problems and start to apply this new learning with their clients, they quickly begin to see the enhanced effectiveness of their counselling and become confident in the model;
- as their confidence and expertise grow they attend less to client problems and more quickly guide clients into identifying abilities and new possibilities for change, and searching for solutions that work;
- finally, after they have developed competence in applying the finding-solutions-to-problems model, some then begin to evaluate other models of helping and incorporate appropriate aspects of those models into their work.

This sequence of development is not the same for every student; nevertheless, it represents a general pattern that has been observed over six years of teaching the model. In that time, the finding-solutions-to-problems model has proved to be an effective approach that has enabled students safely and quickly to increase their confidence and counselling competence. I hope that in reading this book you will experience the same thing!

Acknowledgements

I am especially indebted to John Small and Anne Munro with whom I authored three versions of a book on counselling skills, the most recent being *Counselling: the skills of problem-solving* (1988). Some of the material from that book appears, albeit extensively altered and rearranged, in this one. My two co-authors have retired from counsellor training and school counselling respectively, and while neither was interested in contributing to *Counselling: the skills of finding solutions to problems,* they were encouraging and willing to have appropriate material from the 1988 book used in this one. I thank them for their generosity and support. Also, John's careful proofreading of the manuscript was invaluable.

I am also greatly indebted to Judi Miller with whom I have taught, researched and published since 1988. She has been a creative teacher, insightful critic and willing collaborator in helping to develop a counsellor education programme that integrates problem-solving with solution-focused counselling. Her many insightful suggestions on the manuscript were greatly appreciated.

Perhaps the most important person in helping me decide to write this book has been my wife, Marjorie. From the beginning she has been an enthusiastic supporter and persistent motivator. And, being a trained counsellor and a former vocational counsellor herself, her many comments on the manuscript have been incisive and unfailingly helpful.

Two other people have played key roles in my thinking and development as a counsellor educator. Distinguished Professor Allen Ivey has for many years been a role model, supporter and friend. His positive comments on chapter 2 came at just the right time. Insoo Kim Berg (of the Brief Family Therapy Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA) first introduced solution-focused counselling to me in 1991. Her competent and clear exposition on the model radically altered my thinking about counselling, and for that, I thank her.

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Robert J. Manthei
December 1996

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Counselling is becoming increasingly professionalised. As this happens, there is a need to show how, with training and practice, it can be performed more effectively. This is a challenging task, and this book does not claim to cover all aspects of counselling. Its main contribution is to show how people can be helped by the ethical use of certain practical skills within the finding-solutions-to-problems model of counselling.

The focus of the book: finding solutions to problems

The purpose of this book is to describe how people seeking counselling can be helped to solve their problems. For clients, this process of **finding successful solutions to problems** should also lead to enhanced self-understanding and an increased ability to find solutions to other problems in the future. The term *counselling* is employed here to cover the various skills and principles of helping used in this process. Although the skills and principles that follow are described within a face-to-face relationship between two or more people (counsellor and client(s)), it is recognised that the essentials of individual counselling are directly applicable to other settings as well.

The approach presented assumes that it is imperative for counsellors to work within a framework or model that ensures that their counselling is a planned, intentional activity. Counselling should never be a wholly subjective process that is guided by whim, hunches and the random use of techniques. While the intuitive side of counselling is acknowledged, more emphasis is placed in this book on the thoughtful application of observable skills guided by sound principles of helping.

The focus is on giving counsellors a structure for dealing with client problems that is neither too loose nor too restrictive and one which allows a variety of skills to be used, depending on the counsellor's purpose and the client's needs at any particular time. The central features, described in chapters 5, 6 and 7, include a range of verbal skills that can be used at each stage of the finding-solutions-to-problems model of helping. This is preceded, in chapters 2, 3 and 4 by a discussion of cross-cultural competence, counsellors' self-awareness and their

role in the counselling relationship, and the process of finding solutions to problems.

Throughout the book there is an emphasis on values, attitudes, skills, and ideas that can be readily learnt and put into practice by counsellors working in a wide variety of settings. There are several assumptions in this book about counselling which should be made explicit. Firstly, the counselling skills described focus on influencing people through talking. Other techniques (such as the use of specialised tests, equipment or medication) or the specialised knowledge that is required to work effectively in particular settings (e.g., hospitals, substance abuse clinics, child-care centres), raise complex issues about the rights of clients and the qualifications of counsellors and are considered beyond the scope of this book.

Secondly, the model of helping and the interpersonal skills described are not presumed to be neutral or value-free. Rather, counselling, whatever the approach used, is taken to represent a set of beliefs and assumptions about people, about interpersonal relationships, and about ways of influencing others. For example, when a counsellor and client represent different cultures, genders, lif fe experiences, world views, ages, religions and income levels, such differences ferences will very often have important effects on counselling. Thirdly since such differences ferences are present in every counselling relationship, counsellors must also learn to be comfortable fortable with diversity and competent to deal with it (see chapter 2).

Another basic issue concerning values is whether, in any particular case, face-to-face counselling is in fact the most appropriate way of helping. Instead of encouraging clients to keep making appointments to discuss their problems, the counsellor may be well advised to suggest other means of improvement such as participation in drama, music, physical activity, a change of diet, meditation, or one of the many other forms of helping described in chapter 9. Broadly construed, counselling encompasses a wide variety of helping roles besides the traditional face-to-face relationship with an individual client. It is important that counsellors be knowledgeable about such alternatives, and when they seem appropriate, encourage clients to try them.

Effective counselling requires much more than the practice of particular verbal skills. Counsellors need to know themselves well. They need to know and understand other people. They need to know about and be able to work effectively with cultural differences. They need to know a good deal about social institutions and their information fluences, and they need realistic knowledge about the forces in society which create advantages and disadvantages: the market-place, politics, racism, sexism, and similar forms of prejudice. Power and status issues underlie many of society's problems, and as discussed later in this chapter, they are also present within counselling relationships, no matter how much counsellors would like to minimise them or deny their importance. This book does not deal directly with all of these important topics, but no one should claim competence as a counsellor without some knowledge of them.

The finding-solutions-to-problems model for counselling is a skills-based, problem-solving model that emphasises solutions rather than difficulties and client strengths and abilities rather than deficits. The model is flexible and robust enough for counsellors to incorporate aspects of other approaches. There are, however, several important themes and assumptions about counselling and counsellors that underlay the specific model presented in this book:

- All counselling can be thought of as a process of problem-solving, a commonly used, meta-theoretical approach identified by Dixon and Glover (1984). Within this meta-model, however, there are different approaches to and perspectives of problems. One such perspective, *solution-focused counselling,* will be presented as a preferred form of brief, client-respectful counselling (see chapter 3).
- Many people need help in coping with their difficulties. In general, counselling seeks to help people manage their affairs more effectively in daily life, not to find a cure for some diagnosed personality deficit.
- Because positive outcomes are usually achieved in five to ten sessions (Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996), counselling should be planned to be as brief and simple as possible.
- Most people who seek counselling have within themselves most of the resources for coping which counsellors can help them to identify and strengthen.
- While counsellors offer a variety of counselling skills within a relationship of caring, respect and optimism, ultimately it is the client who determines the nature of the problem, the goals to be achieved and the success of counselling.
- People usually respond better to counselling when they feel some degree of sincerity, warmth, acceptance and empathy towards them, and their counsellor's optimism and confidence about the resolution of their problems.
- The activity of counselling is usefully described as the appropriate use of specific, definable skills at each stage of the helping process (see chapters 5, 6 and 7).
- The definition of counselling should not be restricted to face-to-face work with clients. It is much more broadly based than that and includes a variety of other change agent roles, activities and skills, including consultation and training, family counselling, group work, social work, teaching, supervision, and administration (see chapter 9).
- All counselling involves cultural differences (Pedersen & Ivey, 1993). Since counselling cannot be divorced from these considerations, it is essential that all counsellors develop competence in cross-cultural interactions (see chapter 2).
- Counsellors must be self-aware—of their values, beliefs, biases, cultural capital, motivation and desire to help others. An attitude of critical self-

reflection—of oneself and one's work—must be central to every counsellor's work (see chapter 3).
- Counsellors have responsibilities as professionals to their clients, their colleagues and to the wider community (see chapter 8).
- Counsellors have an ethical duty to maintain and develop themselves professionally by undergoing supervision and continuing their education.

Learning the material presented in this book should be seen as the beginning of your training as a counsellor. It will give you a sound model for conceptualising your work with clients, teach you the necessary skills to implement the model, and encourage you to practise cultural sensitivity and critical self-reflection in your work. However, your on-going training and development should continue for as long as you counsel (see chapter 10).

What is counselling?

It is useful to consider at the outset some of the ways in which counselling relationships differ from ordinary social interaction between friends, acquaintances, and colleagues. There are, of course, many similarities, but in counselling certain features are evident to a greater degree. People start to become clients when they seek help or begin to express their concerns to another person who is willing to listen, clarify what is heard, and help them find solutions using interpersonal skills of the kinds described in this book. Many of these skills are not unique to counselling, but the relationship in which they occur approximates counselling when the relationship is voluntary; when it provides hope, healing and comfort (Peavy, 1996); when it is based on the understanding that there will exist a high degree of confidentiality and when it includes agreement on the personal responsibility of the client. In addition, counsellors do not allow their counselling relationships to be compromised by any other relationships they might have with their clients (called boundary violations (Sheppard, 1994)), for example, as friends or business associates. The more clearly these features are apparent, the more appropriate it is to regard the relationship as counselling.

Like related activities such as teaching, administering, or leading others, counselling can seem somewhat mysterious. But it should not be regarded as a mystique or special gift bestowed on only a few individuals. While it may be true that some people seem to be effective as counsellors without having studied counselling systematically, enough progress has been made in studying and teaching the counselling process to justify confidence in describing it as observable skills used in a planned and intentional way, within a certain kind of relationship and for the purpose of helping clients find solutions to their problems.

A skills-based approach to training

If counselling is to be demystified and made more widely available to clients, the first step is to describe the process and its component skills in language that is both clear and non-technical. There are many possible views of the counselling process, but for learning and teaching purposes it is particularly useful to view it as a series of purposeful, goal-oriented interactions within an authentic relationship, consisting of certain behaviours by one person which partly influence the way the other person responds. What the counsellor says usually has some effect on what the client says, and vice versa. This perspective is not intended to diminish the importance of qualitative factors such as the degree of empathy shown by the counsellor. These factors can be extremely important in counselling and it is essential that counsellors are knowledgeable about them. This book, however, deals with these matters only briefly; its main focus is on explicating specific interactions and their effects within a finding-solutions-to-problems model.

A skills-based approach has been used for several reasons:

- Skills-based training approaches have been shown to be more effective in training counsellors than alternatives (Pedersen & Ivey 1993, p. 2). By teaching identifiable skills that are embedded within a sound model or framework of helping, trainees can more quickly develop competency, confidence and greater clarity about the structure and aims of the process.
- A skills-based approach helps to demystify counselling and makes its practices and techniques more accessible to students and the public. Skills-based training also reduces the likelihood of the trainer being seen or portrayed as a guru—one whose skill and insight is unfathomable and therefore unattainable by others.
- A skills approach will increase a counsellor's range of options and possibilities in working with clients, a notion described by Ivey et al. (1993) as *counsellor intentionality*.
- The teaching, supervision, assessment and monitoring of counselling practices can be based on specific, observable behaviours using a common terminology and a language that is relatively objective, neutral and one that clarifies the process rather than obscures what takes place. Skills training can still allow for less easily identifiable factors such as personal qualities, attitudes and processes of decision-making to be taught, discussed and evaluated.

In practice, the use of specific skills and techniques is common to virtually every model of counselling. Effective counsellors, whatever model they follow, use different skills at different times according to what seems to be most helpful. For example, in the early stages of counselling when one is trying to get a clear view both of what is working well for the client and what is not (the problem), it is usually best to listen carefully and to take note of the client's overt behaviours,

abilities and concerns. At other times, influencing clients by encouraging them to do something may be much more appropriate. For example, sometimes a counsellor will purposely ignore obvious signs of anxiety in a client. At other times the signs may be commented on openly but neutrally, but nothing more is done, thus indicating an acceptance of the behaviour. Alternatively, a counsellor may decide to try to reduce the anxiety level so a freer discussion can take place. Whatever is decided, counsellors must not only be aware of the likely consequences of such variations but also have the skill to carry out their intentions. Exactly what the counsellor decides to do is, of course, both a personal and professional decision—a function of training, experience, knowledge and the approach to counselling being used.

There are limitations to skills-based training, of course, and these need to be borne in mind when using this book. First, skills are not in and of themselves therapeutic—they are merely verbal techniques that may prompt, provoke or promote solution-finding thought, self-assessment, and/or action, but to do so they must still be used with care, good judgement and theoretical intention. Second, skills themselves are not culturally neutral. This cannot be stressed enough. They need to be tested, modified and adapted to fit particular cultures and contexts (Pedersen & Ivey, 1993).

Third, there can be a period early in skills-based counsellor training when counsellors report feeling less natural and increasingly awkward in their counselling styles. They almost invariably report, however, that as their familiarity with the skills and their competence in using them increase, so too do their feelings of fluency and naturalness. Because of this, it is useful to forewarn counsellors at the beginning of their training and to reassure them that their initial awkwardness will gradually evolve into greater confidence and self-assurance with the skills.

Research and theory in counselling

In spite of clear evidence that counselling is effective when compared with no-treatment and placebo controls, it is important to emphasise, that so far, years of careful comparative studies have failed to show consistently that any one theory or approach is generally superior to any other (Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996; Seligman, 1996). In fact, there is a growing belief that no single approach is adequate for use with all client problems (Norcross & Grencavage, 1989). There are a number of reasons for this belief. The main ones are:

- It is extremely difficult and expensive to design controlled studies which satisfactorily compare even just two theories, and even more difficult to generalise empirically-derived results from such studies to actual counselling settings (Seligman, 1996).
- The hope that sophisticated, comparative methods such as meta-analysis would show which theories were best has not yet been realised either (Ivey et

al., 1987; Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996). It should be noted, however, that this does not mean that counselling, generally speaking, is ineffective—only that it is very difficult to show that one particular approach is best. Nevertheless, it is now widely accepted that counselling is indeed effective, that client gains are made in a relatively short period of time and that those gains are maintained over time (Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996; Seligman, 1996).

- Because of the cross-fertilisation of ideas through journals, training programmes and professional organisations, it is most unlikely that any theory is now distinctly different from all others in the way it is practised. In fact, it is currently accepted that common factors across approaches, rather than specific differences, account for a sizeable proportion of the improvement in clients due to counselling (Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996).
- Individual differences between clients require different approaches, so that unless a counsellor has the means, ability and the desire to match every client to a distinct theory and set of techniques, some sort of eclecticism seems inevitable.
- Finally, research has shown that the best predictors of counselling outcome are not specific approaches, but client variables and relationship factors— in that order (Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996).

Using research on counselling to inform and guide one's work should be every counsellor's aim. Unfortunately, using research in this way is not at all common, as evidenced by Sexton and Whiston's (1996) findings that most counsellors neither read research nor conduct it. With increasing calls for accountability in counselling and greater regulation of the profession by insurers (called third-party payers), counsellors can no longer afford to ignore current research findings (Sexton & Whiston, 1996). Although keeping up to date with current research is not easy, it can be done by:

- subscribing to and reading journals that publish outcome research (see, for example, the list provided by Sexton (1996));
- reading reviews and meta-analyses of large numbers of studies which are published in journals (some journals now publish regular reviews of research every two or three years);
- reading books that publish reviews of research and counselling practices, e.g., the *Handbook of psychotherapy and behaviour change* (Bergin & Garfield, 1994);
- attending seminars, workshops and discussion groups where there is regular discussion of current research and best practices.

EXERCISE 1.1

1 In order to begin familiarising yourself with the counselling research literature and how to access it, think of a question or concern you have about counselling. Next, go to a library to search what the literature has to say about that topic. To do this you may have to learn how to search *Psychological Abstracts* or *Sociological Abstracts,* use computer-assisted searching tools (CD-ROM data bases like *ERIC, Psychlit*), and, finally,

integrate in a sensible way the results of the studies you are able to access. After you have finished your search, share your findings and experience with others by discussing the following:

i how and why you selected your original question or topic;
ii the process which you used to search for relevant literature;
iii a brief summary of what you discovered about your topic;
iv a summary of what you learned about the whole process by doing this exercise.

2 Repeat this exercise at various points during your training. Very quickly you should become familiar with the resources that are available to you and how best to access them.

Although this book presents a specific model of counselling (finding solutions to concerns within a problem-solving framework), it is recognised that there are many other theories and approaches to counselling—by one count over 400 (Karasu, 1986). Counsellors are urged to acquaint themselves with the major ones and to integrate features of those that seem most useful into their own work in an informed, purposeful way. Learning different theories can provide new perspectives on clients' problems and suggest alternative ways for counsellors to help. This approach fits in with the growing integration movement that stresses the common aspects rather than the differences among the many approaches (Norcross & Grencavage, 1989).

Theorising about counselling is presented in this book from a very practical point of view: as providing a rationale for whatever model of counselling is adopted, and for guiding the counsellor's thinking and behaviour about practical issues as they arise in the counselling relationship. However, the specific theory or model outlined is that of an overarching model of problem-solving (see chapter 3). Briefly, it is recommended that counsellors accept as meaningful the problems and complaints that clients present, and to assume that clients can be