

INTERPERSONAL

SKILLS TRAINING

A Handbook
for
Funeral Home Staffs

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

**INTERPERSONAL
SKILLS
TRAINING**

**A HANDBOOK FOR
FUNERAL SERVICE STAFFS**

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and
Life Transition
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DEDICATION

To my many funeral director friends throughout the United States and Canada. It has only been through your encouragement, validation, and support that these materials have been refined to the point of maximum effectiveness for the learner. Thanks for participating in my workshops and challenging me to continue to share my thoughts and feelings about funeral service.

I like to think that funeral directors have, in part, helped me discover meaning in my life. Someone once said, "All of us are born for a reason, but all of us don't discover why. Success in life has nothing to do with what you gain in life or accomplish for yourself. It's what you do for others." I'd also like to think that this book will help funeral home staffs "do for others" to the best of their ability during one of life's most difficult of times.

A.D.W.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank all of the people who encouraged me to write this book. Many of my funeral director friends throughout the United States and Canada have been supportive of my efforts to make a contribution to funeral service. Without them, this text would not have become a reality. Particular thanks go to Ken Parson and Garl Matchett who stimulated my initial interest in working with funeral directors.

Special thanks also go to participants in my workshops who have helped me explore and expand my thinking. They have helped me refine these materials to the point of maximum effectiveness for the learner.

The greatest debts of gratitude are owed to my wife, Susan, and daughter, Megan, for their understanding, patience, tolerance, encouragement, and love. These two bring meaning and purpose to both my personal and professional life.

August 1990

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FOREWORD

At a national convention of Compassionate Friends, someone said words that I'll never forget: "Sometimes when just one person is missing the whole world seems so empty."

This is precisely when you, the funeral director, are called. Death has struck the family like a tidal wave. They are cut loose from their moorings and are all but drowning in the sea of their turbulent sorrow. As the bereaved are empty, so is the world around them.

At precisely this moment, many funeral directors are searching for their role-identity. "I'm a funeral director, not a counselor"—familiar words that both Dr. Alan Wolfelt and I have heard on too many occasions. We want to scream, "Look at the bereaved sitting before you. Part of them is being buried with their loved one. Pain and fear are washing over them in waves and they are wondering if they will ever survive. They are looking to **you** for consolation and guidance. The word **counselor** comes from the Latin **consilium** meaning "to consult." The survivors are there for your advice, suggestions, and experience. It's not a question whether you, the funeral director, like the word **counselor**. By definition, you are! The needy, empty people around you are there for **consultation**. The real question is whether you will be an effective counselor or not." "But I make a living out of funeral service, how then can I be a counselor?" is the next question we hear. So do helping professions like clergy, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers "make a living" by helping others. The word **profit** is not an evil word as the Soviet Union is now learning. A caring and knowledgeable businessperson can be a warm and compassionate counselor.

Notice the word *can*. That is why Alan Wolfelt's book is destined to become a classic in its field. The truth is that many schools of mortuary science prepare the student on how to pass the state boards in anatomy and physiology. Too long have counseling and psychological techniques been conspicuous by the absence. As Mark Twain said: "It's not what people know that gets them in trouble but it's what they know that isn't so."

Dr. Wolfelt's informative and comprehensive book will teach you both practical and effective interpersonal skills that are so essential to your response to those who come to you when their world is empty. You will learn, together with your staff, how to listen more dynamically to both their verbal and non-verbal clues. As you test yourself by role-playing, sentence completion, and self-evaluation, you will learn much about yourself—your own genuineness, warmth, respect, empathy, and trust.

Dr. Wolfelt has devoted much of his creative career to children by reminding us that a person is a person no matter how small. One of the worst problems is youngsters' lack of understanding because of adult secrecy. They, too, need to express their emotions through the ceremonies of death—the wake, the funeral, the “shivah,” the interment. Funeral directors are tenderly instructed on how to be sensitive to the age and level of each child.

Most important, Alan Wolfelt has written: “If you want to be more helpful to others, help yourself.” Ralph Waldo Emerson said it differently: “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.” The book faces squarely the stresses of the funeral director and the impending signals of burnout. Some of the latest empirical studies now demonstrate that people with emotional overload are not those who necessarily work your long hours. Rather those who burn out are because of low self-esteem and sense of professional inadequacy. Both Dr. Wolfelt and I believe in the great work you are doing in ministering to those in agony and distress. We know that the research studies at the Harvard Community School of Psychiatry and the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto rate you—the funeral director—as the *highest* among professionals in helping the bereaved. Now, you must believe it, too! With greater training in interpersonal skills, you will feel even better about yourself.

One final word: The final activity is “Moving Toward Closure: Gift-Giving.” As I read this book, I began to understand that this marvelous book is not only for funeral directors, but for *all* people in their relationship to self, family, and community. We will *all* gain insights that will change not only our professional

but our personal lives as well. I have grown as a result of this powerful volume. Dr. Alan Wolfelt, clinical thanatologist and educator, has given us a *gift* that can change our lives. As Chamfort said: "God comforts us that we may be better comforters."

Rabbi Earl A. Grollman, D.D.
Lecturer
Author of "Living When a Loved One
Has Died"

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
FOREWORD	vii
LIST OF ACTIVITIES	xix
LIST OF FIGURES	xx
PART I RECOGNIZING THE ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	1
1. WHY THIS BOOK?	3
<i>A Focus on Service</i>	5
<i>Format of Text</i>	6
<i>A Challenge from the Author</i>	7
<i>Reference</i>	8
2. ACKNOWLEDGING THE NEED FOR INTERPERSONAL SKILLS IN THE FUNERAL HOME	9
<i>Why Be a Funeral Director</i>	9
<i>Essential Personal Qualities</i>	12
<i>Interpersonal Skills and Changes within Funeral Service</i>	13
<i>Potential Role Conflict between Helper and Business Person</i>	14
<i>Interpersonal Skills Training Is Vital to the Future of Funeral Service</i>	14
<i>Summary Outcomes of Chapter</i>	15
<i>References</i>	21
3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HELPING FUNERAL DIRECTOR	23
<i>Helping Characteristics</i>	24
1. <i>Empathy</i>	24
2. <i>Respect</i>	26
3. <i>Warmth and Caring</i>	27
4. <i>Genuineness</i>	29
<i>A Brief Review of Helper Characteristics</i>	30
<i>Summary Outcomes of Chapter</i>	31
<i>References</i>	31

4. UNDERSTANDING THE HELPING PROCESS 33
The Relationship 33
Phases in the Helping Relationship 34
Summary Outcomes of Chapter 37

PART II DEVELOPING INTERPERSONAL SKILLS 39

**5. DEVELOPING ESSENTIAL HELPING SKILLS FOR
 SUCCESSFUL FUNERAL SERVICE PRACTICE 41**
Is This an "Art" or a "Science"? 41
The Importance of Knowing Yourself 42
Three Levels of Communication 43
Introduction to Helping Skills Training 44
Phases of Acquiring New Interpersonal Skills 45
 Phase 1. Initial Learning 45
 Phase 2. Uncomfortable Use 46
 Phase 3. Consciously Skilled 46
 Phase 4. Naturally Skilled 46
Format for Learning Helping Skills 47

6. SKILL ONE: ATTENDING OR LISTENING 49
 1. Define the Skill 49
 Personal Qualities of an Effective Listener 50
 2. Identify Purposes for Using the Skill 51
 3. Enhance Understanding of the Skill 51
 Major Components of Attending 54
 Other Components of Attending 56
 4. Illustrate Use of Attending 57
 5. Identify Outcomes Expected 57
 6. Role-play—Demonstration 58
 General Guidelines for Providing Feedback 59
 7. Summarize and List Guidelines for the Skill 60
 8. Notes or Questions You Have for the Trainer Related to This Skill 61

7. SKILL TWO: PARAPHRASING 65
 1. Define the Skill 65
 2. Identify Purposes for Using the Skill 65
 3. Enhance Understanding of the Skill 65
 4. Illustrate the Use of Paraphrasing 66
 Illustration A 66
 Illustration B 67
 Illustration C 67
 5. Identify Outcome Expected 67
 6. Role-play—Demonstration 68
 7. Summarize and List Guidelines for the Skill 69
 8. Notes or Questions You Have for the Trainer Related to This Skill 70

8. SKILL THREE: CLARIFYING	71
1. Define the Skills	71
2. Identify Purposes for Using the Skill	71
3. Enhance Understanding of the Skill	72
4. Illustrate the Use of Clarifying	72
Illustration A	72
Illustration B	73
Illustration C	73
5. Identify Outcomes Expected	73
6. Role-play—Demonstration	73
7. Summarize and List Guidelines for the Skill	75
8. Notes or Questions You Have for the Trainer Related to the Skill	76
9. SKILL FOUR: PERCEPTION CHECKING	77
1. Define the Skill	77
2. Identify Purposes for Using the Skill	77
3. Enhance Understanding of Perception Checking	77
4. Illustrate the Use of Perception Checking	78
Illustration A	78
Illustration B	78
Illustration C	78
5. Identify Outcomes Expected	79
6. Role-play—Demonstration	79
7. Summarize and List Guidelines for the Skill	80
8. Notes or Questions You Have for the Trainer Related to the Skill	81
10. SKILL FIVE: LEADING	83
1. Define the Skill	83
2. Identifying Purposes for Using the Skill	83
3. Enhance Understanding of Leading	84
4. Illustrate the Use of Indirect Leading	85
Illustration A	85
Illustration B	85
Illustration C	85
5. Illustrate the Use of Direct Leading	85
Illustration A	85
Illustration B	85
Illustration C	85
6. Identify Outcomes Expected	86
7. Role-play—Demonstration	86
8. Summarize and List Guidelines for the Skill	88
9. Notes or Questions You Have for the Trainer Related to the Skill	88
11. SKILL SIX: QUESTIONING	89
1. Define the Skill	89
2. Identify Purposes for Using the Skill	89
Special Note	89
3. Enhance Understanding of Questioning	90

Open-ended Questions	90
Closed Questions	90
Questioning Behavior	91
4. Illustrate the Use of Questioning	92
Illustration A	92
Illustration B	92
Illustration C	93
5. Identify Outcomes Expected	93
6. Role-play—Demonstration	93
7. Summarize and List Guidelines for the Skill	95
8. Notes or Questions You Have for the Trainer Related to the Skill	95
12. SKILL SEVEN: REFLECTING FEELINGS	97
1. Define the Skill	97
2. Identify Purposes for Using the Skill	97
3. Enhance Understanding of Reflecting Feelings	98
4. Illustrate the Use of Reflecting Feelings	99
Illustration A	99
Illustration B	99
Illustration C	99
5. Identify Outcomes Expected	100
Objectives Being Accomplished	100
6. Role-play—Demonstration	100
7. Summarize and List Guidelines for the Skill	102
8. Notes or Questions You Have for the Trainer Related to the Skill	102
13. SKILL EIGHT: INFORMING	103
1. Define the Skill	103
2. Identify Purposes for Using the Skill	103
3. Enhance Understanding of Informing	103
4. Illustrate the Use of Informing	104
Illustration A	104
Illustration B	104
Illustration C	104
5. Identify Outcomes Expected	105
6. Role-play—Demonstration	105
7. Summarize and List Guidelines for the Skill	107
8. Notes or Questions You Have for the Trainer Related to the Skill	107
14. SKILL NINE: SUMMARIZING	109
1. Define the Skill	109
2. Identify Purposes for Using the Skill	109
3. Enhance Understanding of Summarizing	109
4. Illustrate the Use of Summarizing	110
Illustration A	110
Illustration B	110
Illustration C	111
5. Identify Outcomes Expected	111
6. Role-play—Demonstration	111

7. Summarize and List Guidelines for the Skill	113
8. Notes or Questions You Have for the Trainer Related to the Skill	113
Summary Outcomes of Part II	114

**PART III OVERCOMING BARRIERS
TO IMPLEMENTATION 115**

15. BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION 117

<i>Funeral Director Dominance</i>	118
<i>Bombarding with Questions</i>	118
<i>Inappropriate Self-disclosure</i>	119
<i>Offering Platitudes or False Reassurance</i>	119
<i>Discouraging the Expression of Emotions and Tears</i>	120
<i>Emotional Distancing</i>	120
<i>Summary Outcomes of Chapter</i>	122

**16. THE INTEGRATION AND IMPLEMENTATION
OF FUNERAL DIRECTOR HELPING SKILLS 123**

<i>Enhancing Skills through Practice</i>	123
<i>Observation Sheets</i>	125
<i>Summary Outcomes of Chapter</i>	125

PART IV GRIEF AND MOURNING 133

17. UNDERSTANDING GRIEF AND MOURNING 135

<i>Dispelling Five Common Myths about Grief</i>	136
<i>Myth #1: Grief and Mourning Are the Same Experience</i>	136
<i>Myth #2: A Predictable and Orderly Stage-like Progression Exists to the Experience of Mourning</i>	137
<i>Myth #3: The Best Procedure Is to Move Away from Grief Instead of Toward It</i>	138
<i>Myth #4: Following the Death of Someone Significant to You, the Goal Is to "Get Over" Your Grief</i>	140
<i>Myth #5: Tears Expressing Grief Are Only a Sign of Weakness</i>	141
<i>Summary Related to Myths</i>	142
<i>References</i>	142

18. UNIQUENESS OF GRIEF RESPONSE 143

1. Nature of the Relationship with the Person Who Died	143
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	144
2. Availability, Helpfulness, and Ability of the Person to Make Use of a Social Support System	145
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	145
3. Unique Characteristics of the Bereaved Person	145
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	145
4. Unique Characteristics of the Person Who Died	145
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	146

5. The Nature of the Death	146
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	147
6. Person's Religious and Cultural History	147
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	148
7. Other Crises or Stresses in the Person's Life	148
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	148
8. Previous Experiences with Death	148
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	149
9. Social Expectations Based on the Sex of the Survivor	149
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	149
10. Ritual or Funeral Experience	149
<i>Questions to Ask Self as Helper</i>	150
Summary Related to Grief Response	150

19. OVERVIEW OF NORMAL EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF 151

<i>Shock/Denial/Numbness/Disbelief</i>	152
<i>Disorganization/Confusion/Searching/Yearning</i>	154
<i>Generalized Anxiety/Panic/Fear</i>	155
<i>Physiological Changes</i>	156
<i>Explosive Emotions</i>	157
<i>Outward Explosive Emotions</i>	158
<i>Inward Explosive Emotions</i>	159
<i>Guilt/Remorse/Assessing Culpability</i>	159
<i>Loss/Emptiness/Sadness</i>	163
<i>Relief/Release</i>	165
<i>Reconciliation</i>	167
<i>References</i>	170

20. UNDERSTANDING COMMON PATTERNS

OF AVOIDING GRIEF	171
<i>Common Avoidance Patterns</i>	172
1. <i>The Postponer</i>	173
2. <i>The Displacer</i>	174
3. <i>The Replacer</i>	174
4. <i>The Minimizer</i>	175
5. <i>The Somaticizer</i>	176
<i>Consequences of Adopting Grief Avoidance Patterns</i>	177
<i>Encouraging the Healthy Expression of Grief</i>	177

21. CHILDREN AND GRIEF 179

<i>Developmental Concepts of Death</i>	180
<i>Dimensions of Response to Death</i>	181
<i>Children and Funerals</i>	181
<i>Children, Religion, and Death</i>	183
<i>Children, the Family, and Mourning</i>	184
<i>Open Families Versus Closed Families</i>	184
<i>Final Thoughts</i>	185
<i>References</i>	186
<i>Summary Outcomes of Part IV</i>	185

PART V CARING FOR THE CAREGIVER	187
22. FUNERAL SERVICE AND STRESS:	
CARING FOR THE CAREGIVER	189
<i>The Funeral Director and Stress</i>	<i>189</i>
<i>Exhaustion and Loss of Energy</i>	<i>191</i>
<i>Irritability and Impatience</i>	<i>191</i>
<i>Cynicism and Detachment</i>	<i>191</i>
<i>Physical Complaints and Depression</i>	<i>192</i>
<i>Disorientaion and Confusion</i>	<i>192</i>
<i>Omnipotence and Feeling Indispensable</i>	<i>193</i>
<i>Minimization and Denial of Feelings</i>	<i>193</i>
<i>Am I Experiencing Funeral Service Burnout?</i>	<i>196</i>
<i>Guidelines for Caring for the Funeral Director</i>	<i>198</i>
<i>Final Thoughts</i>	<i>200</i>
<i>Summary Outcomes of Chapter</i>	<i>201</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>201</i>
<i>Additional Resource</i>	<i>202</i>
23. A FINAL WORD	203
TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES	207
INDEX	209
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	219

LIST OF ACTIVITIES

2.1	<i>Role of Interpersonal Skills</i>	15
2.2	<i>Sentence Completion Inventory Regarding Personal Attitudes about Being Involved in Funeral Service</i>	16
2.3	<i>Self-rating Interpersonal Skills</i>	20
3.1	<i>Self-rating on Empathy</i>	26
3.2	<i>Self-rating on Respect</i>	27
3.3	<i>Self-rating on Warmth and Caring</i>	28
3.4	<i>Self-rating on Genuineness</i>	29
4.1	<i>Discussion of Phases in Helping Relationship</i>	36
6.1	<i>Communication through Attending Skills</i>	58
7.1	<i>Group Rehearsal with Trainer Paraphrasing</i>	68
7.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Paraphrasing</i>	69
8.1	<i>Group Rehearsal with Trainer Perception Clarifying</i>	73
8.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Clarifying</i>	74
9.1	<i>Group Rehearsal with Trainer Perception Checking</i>	79
9.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Perception Checking</i>	80
10.1	<i>Group Rehearsal with Trainer Leading</i>	86
10.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Leading</i>	87
11.1	<i>Group Rehearsal with Trainer Questioning</i>	93
11.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Questioning</i>	94
12.1	<i>Group Rehearsal with Trainer Reflecting Feelings</i>	100
12.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Reflecting Feelings</i>	101
13.1	<i>Group Rehearsal with Trainer Informing</i>	105
13.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Informing</i>	106
14.1	<i>Group Rehearsal with Trainer Summarizing</i>	111
14.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Summarizing</i>	112
15.1	<i>Group Rehearsal with Training Overcoming Communication Barriers</i>	121
15.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Overcoming Communication Barriers</i>	121
16.1	<i>Group Observation of Training Integration of Skills</i>	124
16.2	<i>Triad Break-out Rehearsal Integration of Helping Skills</i>	124
19.1	<i>Reflections on Death Experiences</i>	169
22.1	<i>Personal Signs of Stress and Self-care Strategies</i>	201
23.1	<i>Moving Toward Closure: Gift Giving</i>	205

LIST OF FIGURES

2.1	<i>Qualities of Life as Identified by American Institute for Research</i>	11
3.1	<i>Rating Scale for Personal Characteristics</i>	25
5.1	<i>Progression of Skill Acquisition</i>	45
6.1	<i>Attending Skills for Funeral Home Staff</i>	52
16.1	<i>Observation Sheet I</i>	126
16.2	<i>Observation Sheet II</i>	129
21.1	<i>Dimensions of Childhood Grief</i>	182
22.1	<i>Brief Funeral Service Burnout Survey (BFSBS)</i>	197

PART I

RECOGNIZING

THE ROLE

OF

INTERPERSONAL

SKILLS

WHY THIS BOOK?

The impetus for this book came from the enthusiastic response of funeral home staffs who have discovered the rewards of learning effective interpersonal skills. Effective interpersonal or “helping skills” serve as the foundation upon which other life skills are developed. Sound funeral service practice is dependent on high levels of interpersonal communication.

This book is the culmination of the author’s efforts to contribute to funeral service in a productive and, hopefully, meaningful way. My desire is that the contents be of value to both the student just starting out in funeral service and the experienced practitioner. For the student, this book is intended to provide a solid foundation in interpersonal skills training and their mastery. For the experienced funeral director, the book will serve as a resource for assessing current skills, adding new skills, and enhancing professional competence.

As a trainer of funeral home staffs I work from the conviction that all interpersonal relationships are either helpful (growth-enhancing), neutral (neither helpful or harmful), or harmful (destructive). I also believe that skills in responding helpfully to others are not innate, but learned through modeling and focused practice.

This book provides principles, practical skills, and activities whose aim is to enhance funeral home staffs’ ability to respond helpfully to others. So, in essence, the contents of this text are directed at persons in funeral service who want to be more effective in working with people. My hope is that by the time you have completed this training program you will have some

additional tools which will allow you to feel even more comfortable in your interpersonal relationships.

During my years as a college student and prior to becoming a person who works as a clinical thanatologist and educator, I had the distinct privilege of living and working in a progressive funeral home for seven years. As my own learning progressed, I began to teach funeral home staffs—both employers and employees—human relations or helping skills. What I discovered was a group of very caring people who had a true desire to find specific ways to better help people before, during, and after the funeral. I also discovered that when funeral home staffs worked together in an effort to learn interpersonal skills, their effectiveness and sense of satisfaction with their chosen profession of funeral service increased tremendously.

As I have traveled throughout the United States and Canada, training funeral directors, I'm always disappointed when I encounter that segment of funeral directors who firmly believe that "funeral directors are not and should not be counselors."

My own belief is that any funeral director who does not believe he or she "counsels" families might want to consider if this profession is really meant for him or her. This debate about "Is the funeral director a counselor?" goes beyond definitional semantics to the essential role of the funeral director.

Perhaps Howard Raether and Robert Slater (1975) responded to this question best when they wrote in their text, *The Funeral Director and His Role As Counselor*, that, "Most persons who notify the funeral director of a death and ask him to be of service are in essence saying, 'I have a problem; what should I do?' As soon as the funeral director acknowledges this notification and begins to give direction to the person or persons involved, he assumes the role of counselor."

There is no doubt that this long-lasting argument about the "funeral director as counselor" is based on how one defines counseling. If we define counseling in the following way, perhaps we can all agree that funeral directors are, in fact, counselors: