



BLANK MINDS *and*
STICKY MOMENTS
in **COUNSELLING**

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES *and* **PROVOCATIVE THEMES**



SECOND EDITION

Janice Russell and Graham Dexter



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S SAGE

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welcome to the concepts: introduction and overview

Abstract: In this chapter, we overview the rationale for the book, and introduce the second edition. We offer some examples of what kind of instances present as blank minds or sticky moments, and provide the reader with a map to guide them through the rest of the book.

Welcome

Welcome to the second edition of *Blank Minds and Sticky Moments*. In the first edition of this book, we invited you to be open to stimulation, to have an interest in what makes counselling tick, and to be willing to be entertained. We suggested that if we could achieve this, and if you could glean or reinforce some educative principles to boot, then your money was well spent.

Feedback suggested that we achieved our aims. The book was appraised as highly pragmatic as well as having a ‘can’t put it down’ flavour. A second edition was called for, so here we are, offering another opportunity for you to evaluate and challenge the myths and false expectations that litter the world of counselling, while focusing on successes, pragmatic approaches and provocative lines of thought.

Who are we?

Our names are Janice Russell and Graham Dexter, and we have worked in counselling and communications over a 30-year span. We bring personal experience and influence, with all that this entails, to our work and our lives. Even now that we are of an age to qualify for SAGA car insurance, we still indulge ourselves when some infantile-based

response rears its cheeky head. We try and resist the concept of having self-developed to a point of 'getting there'. Having five children between us, and two grandchildren, we run a gamut of life experiences. Our family brings us a great deal of joy, pleasure and pride: equally, we know loss, frustration, fear and uncertainty. We do our very best whilst not having all the answers, weaving our way through our personal journeys, using survival techniques and the resources that we have at the time. We're two ordinary people who from time to time do extraordinary things, just like you.

As we explained in the first edition, we both chose 'helping' professions at an early age, Jan training in social work, Graham in psychiatric nursing. We both fell into counselling in the early 1980s as much by accident as deliberate intent, and undertook a wide range of ventures to learn and practise our art. One of those ventures was to return to higher education as mature students; we believe that this experience helps us now to teach in an understanding and creative manner. We began to critique that which we had learned, and we encourage our own students to do likewise. So now we counsel, supervise, train, consult, research, read, write, travel; we go to the cinema, go walking, keep pigeons, still keep on trying to learn new things (currently dancing and Portuguese), and we value what we have.

What's changed since the first edition?

Since the last edition, we have moved to Portugal, enjoying the laid-back culture and the sunnier climes, and discovering different challenges. Specifically, it's interesting to be an immigrant, to experience cultural difference from a particular perspective, to try to learn a new language, and to set up a livelihood when you are an incomer.

The counselling world has moved too, as the steady 'drip drip' of professionalisation has continued. Definitions of counselling have altered, and there is a greater mergence between counselling and psychotherapy than 10 years ago; there are still no absolute measures of the 'success' of counselling. The profession is still messy around the edges, with a tendency to mysticism here and there.

When we wrote the first edition, there were moves to make a register of counsellors, and we suggested that it would be interesting to see how this is policed, given that counselling depends upon human interactive skills and activities – would helping people problem-solve over dinner parties be illegal? Could people be outlawed for empathising during pillow talk, on the grounds that it has elicited self-disclosure beyond that which the partner had wanted to engage in

(but of course only realised this retrospectively)? The current quality of efforts to police the profession is the subject of some disappointment, wherein criteria for 'good character' and 'fitness to practise' are at best inconsistent and at worst simply non-establishable (Department of Health, 2006).

Despite a continued fuzziness, BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) accreditation has become much more formally recognised now in the UK, and many organisations demand it when recruiting counsellors. Online counselling has developed, with a number of delightful paradoxes which invite new perspectives on received wisdoms and definitions, some of which create dilemmas for practitioners.

We commented in the first edition that a degree of uncertainty has always facilitated innovation within counselling: yet we had noticed an increasing shift away from the pioneer approach of what *could* be done in counselling being replaced by an insistence on what *should* be done. The pendulum has shifted a little, and we observe new spirits of adventure and discovery emerging with new technologies and ways of thinking. At the same time, the urge to regulate is stronger than ever. Notions of success and failure continue to haunt even the most experienced practitioners.

In Portugal, regulations are way behind those in the UK, painting a different picture altogether. In the indigenous culture, there is a split between 'psychologists' and counsellors. Psychologists are the practitioners most likely to be officially assimilated within government health initiatives such as community addiction teams. Counselling tends to be offered by those who have moved here, and often offered with innovation and little regulation – such as counselling while cliff-top walking. In many ways, the situation reminds us of how things once were in the UK.

Why the book?

We still carry the conviction that counselling draws on ordinary, non-mystical activity and skills in a principled manner. At the end of the day, we believe that counselling is about a purpose, and an attitude. The adoption of each results in the construction of a number of skills and techniques which achieve the desired outcome. However, such skills and techniques are merely principled footprints made on the road to fulfil the purpose; just because one person walked this way, we don't all have to. There is no one right way to do it, and there is no proficiency in technique without the attitude and approach of inquiry. We essentially understand counselling to be a dynamic

process of negotiation which purports to create opportunities for self-determined change for the client.

The overall purpose of this book, then, is to address the principles and issues associated with the complexities of counselling, whether for the 'pure' counsellor, the student counsellor, or for workers who use counselling as one part of their job, e.g. mental health workers, psychiatric social workers. We recognise that people arrive at the role of counsellor through different routes, some through academic courses, others through practice-based learning. Some deliberately work towards counselling as a career, some 'fall' into it through their life's journey. How often do we hear people say that 'I always ended up listening to people's problems anyway, so I thought I might as well train'. We want this book to be accessible to a varied audience, to have academic credibility and to be non-exclusive. In other words, we want to reach the practitioner, whatever their background.

The idea for the book began from our own practice in counselling, training and our supervision of practitioners. It had become apparent that whatever their level of training and experience, when counsellors feel stuck, certain themes, issues or 'skill gaps' emerged consistently. At such times, counsellors either don't know what to do, do not have the confidence to try out their own ideas, or suspect that they may be about to infringe some taboo or other. We wanted a book which would address these areas in detail, with reference to pragmatic experience and reference to relevant literature.

In our experience as trainers, we had found that the 'blank minds' and 'sticky moments' to which we refer are often not fully addressed in training courses or supervision, despite there being a strong call from practitioners that they should be. There is a dearth of literature which is bold enough to present both pragmatic and academic issues as integral to each other and to the profession of counselling rather than as separate and specialised subjects. Having identified some of the common issues or scenarios which seem to confuse or baffle counsellors, we suggest a range of intervention techniques to help deal with them. We acknowledge some of the deeper intra- and interpersonal issues which may occur within the counselling relationship, while examining theoretical underpinnings which might influence them.

The philosophy of the book is very much concerned with empowering the counsellor to free themselves up to be imaginative, creative and flexible. Much counselling literature has been caught up with what *should* be done, whereas the intention of this book is to encourage counsellors to think of what *could* be done within a framework of purposeful and ethical practice. We adopt a somewhat realist and relativist view that while psychological theories are a useful adjunct

to counselling, in the end they are merely informed speculations: we need to beware the trap of accepting metaphors as gospel. Ask yourself – who said that the self is like a layered onion? Where does the idea of ‘real’ experience, or the notion of the self having a ‘core’, come from? How can we measure the *depth* of emotion? We are interested to demystify some of the more ‘precious’ aspects of counselling which can be inhibiting to the counsellor, or which might diminish their trust in the client. It is important to regain some humility for a profession which assumes and theorises so much about human nature.

The inception of this book lies in strong personal views, experiences and philosophy. We made the original proposal to our publishers in 1995: their readers expressed severe reservations. One was that the subject matter was not appropriate to be treated humorously, while another was that it seemed a very pragmatic and eclectic approach which was not currently in vogue. We believed that counselling needs to be developed towards the interests of the client first. We depend on the pragmatic, wanted to be light-hearted here and there, and so decided to publish ourselves.

Since then, ties have been loosened a little. Works such as *Counselling for Toads* (de Board, 1998) and *Tigger on the Couch* (James, 2007) appeared on the market, with deserved success, marrying serious theory with entertainment and wry humour. Now we are delighted that SAGE have chosen to commission the second edition. We trust that you will find it both helpful and provocative, and a contribution to the rich debate of counselling.

The book progresses through inherently interdependent sections, focusing first on pragmatic issues, presenting ideas, approaches, principles and skills, moving toward exploration of the more general context of counselling and some of the theoretical issues and arguments. We believe that both need to be considered by every single person who is offering someone else theory-based psychological help.

The remainder of this chapter will guide you through the structure and spirit of the book, painting a picture of the kind of blank minds or sticky moments which seem to be common, directing you to the relevant chapter for each. We might add that some of our personal worst moments in counselling have taught us best, and we can now look back at these with a good dose of humility and sometimes with humour. They are many and varied, some more ridiculous than others, some more dramatic, some more serious; we learned from them all. We hope that as you read on, you will dare to feel reassured, amused, even, engaged, and perhaps a little freed up.

Excuse me, I believe I was here first

Chapter 2 explores 'intrapersonal issues'. We refer here to those kinds of moments when whatever is going on for the counsellor as a direct result of the work influences either their lives or their professionally intentioned interventions.

For example, the guru effect. Most of us have moments where a client says something like:

Jan, this has been so useful. I don't know what you've done, but whatever it was, it was wonderful. You have helped me more than anybody ever. I don't know what I'd have done without you. I shall recommend you to my friends, and if ever I'm stuck I know where to come!

When this did first happen for Janice, she went home with a rosy glow, pleased that the counselling had 'worked'. And lo! to be so marvellous into the bargain: to have been so indispensable, so magical: to have such powers.

Over a period of time, niggles entered the process of self-satisfied reflection: it was those small statements: 'I don't know what you've done', and 'I don't know what I'd have done without you'. Questions arose – who had done what, to whom, and what had been learned? Maybe, just maybe, Janice's need to be 'the helper' had been a bit too strong.

Of course, time then generated opportunities for somewhat humbler and more gratified feelings. Helping someone work through a complicated bereavement where reviewing the process enabled a client to go away with a method for coping with future problems and concerns, brought a new understanding regarding the educational and equal aspects of counselling. This was a delightful outcome and good learning. To achieve it, we need to hang up the magician's hat and be comfortable in the role of sorcerer's apprentice. It's very easy to be seduced or even motivated by the thought of being somehow 'special' in 'helping' others.

'I know just how you feel' is another little gem which falls within intrapersonal issues, and which most will recognise. People do it all the time. When Janice had breast cancer, many people claimed to know just how she felt because they had once had a suspicious lump on their back (which had turned out to be a cyst), a pain in their breast (muscle strain), a painful growth on their foot (a verruca). Even the breast nurse knew just how Janice felt, so inaccurately and pompously that Janice wanted to slap her (Russell, 1998).

In the counselling situation, this tendency (identification – not the urge to slap!) is an easy temptation. Maybe you are working with

someone who has experienced a loss that seems similar to your own experience: you may think you know how the client feels. Again, very common, very easy to do.

Intrapersonal certainty can also creep into situations you have never experienced, where the counsellor can *imagine* how you must feel. Some years ago on a training tape we heard the following, where a woman was talking about the death of her husband. The dialogue went something like.

Client: I've got these really strong feelings and I don't know how I'm going to get through them. I feel so guilty.

Counsellor: It's normal to feel guilty when someone dies. You loved your husband and you feel there's more you could have done or said. It's normal to feel guilty because you are still alive.

Client (animatedly): But that's just it. I feel guilty because I feel so free. He was a miserable old bastard and I'm glad to be rid of him. And now you're like all the rest, making me feel bad for not having normal feelings.

[15-second gap on tape.]

Counsellor: Oh. I see.

Beware the power of the theory-led imagination! All of these are examples of how what is going on for us might intrude into what is going on for the client.

An addition to this chapter in this revised edition is an exploration of what might happen intrapersonally for counsellors in training, when their lamp is burning brightly, and they are keen to 'try this at home'. We suggest that counselling training should perhaps carry a government health warning (Dexter, 1997), and we invite the reader to look closely at the possible personal cost of such undertaking.

Knowing me, knowing you – aha!

In Chapter 3 we will look at interpersonal issues, employing four key headings of intimacy, sexuality, friendship and culture. The focus is on what goes on, and what affects, the relationship between counsellor and client. We look at complications which might arise through unconscious motivation, e.g. that which Freud coined transference and countertransference. These are quite simple concepts to describe a process which might occur in any relationship, where, quite literally, feelings which were evoked in a previous relationship are 'transferred' to the current situation.

For example, Graham once counselled a woman who was the same age as his mother, with offspring the same age as him. She presented herself as something of a victim in the family, coming over

as martyrish, often performing tasks which she didn't want to, and then bemoaning the family for taking her for granted. Graham soon got irritated with her, just as he had with his own mother, who also had a tendency to behave in this way. Once identified, he could use this realisation constructively to both better understand and to challenge the client into new understandings. Not rocket science, but something to be aware of.

Counsellors can also be seduced by letting the client pull their strings. The client may bring a certain way of relating into the counselling relationship. An individual who is used to being related to sexually might act in a way which is sexually provocative, and this may evoke a sexual response from the counsellor: a client who is used to people being irritated by them might have developed a whiny or apologetic interpersonal style, which the counsellor becomes irritated with. Before they know it, the counsellor might actively internalise the proffered role, and begin to behave accordingly.

Simplistically, this can create a form of self-fulfilling prophecy, and unspotted, can lead the way for some very unhelpful and at times exploitative or destructive practice. The chapter explores principles for monitoring and avoiding unhelpful responses.

And then there is the thorny issue of friendship. Most of us, in the process of being empathic, challenging, creative and caring, will meet clients with whom we have a 'natural' rapport: had we met in other circumstances, perhaps friendship might have ensued. It's easy to think, as a colleague of ours put it, 'Oh sod the counselling, let's go down the pub'. And what if we had met in other circumstances – how would it have worked? The answer, of course, is that we'll never know: some of the clients you meet might indeed have developed into friends.¹ Some might not have, and it seems pragmatic to us to have a perspective which recognises our different roles within the relationship,² a perspective which we present throughout the chapter.

Clients turning the table: how the heck do I challenge them?

Chapter 4 offers a dynamic approach to skills and attitudes of challenging clients into leaving behind their own blank minds and sticky moments for ever. If a client is telling us that we don't do this enough, then we need to listen carefully. Client feedback is usually, and theoretically, a useful event. Without it, how many of us would know if our counselling relationships are productive? On occasion, however, the client might use their feedback, wittingly or otherwise, as a means

of gaining control. This can only happen really if the counsellor is not challenging the client.

For example, Vesna, a newly qualified counsellor, is counselling Maria. Maria is a lonely single parent with a history of abuse. Her cohabitee frequently threatens her, and sometimes hits her. Maria is frustrated. What is more, she feels so isolated that when she has the opportunity to talk about her problems, she 'gushes' the story with emotion.

Vesna is more than sympathetic. She was at one time in a similar situation and is keen to show her understanding. What is more, she is apprehensive of taking control of the process and interrupting her client 'in full flow': inexperience leads her to believe that this would be disrespectful. Thus she is not as challenging as she might be to Maria.

It is only a matter of time before Maria lets Vesna know that she expects more: 'I've been for four sessions now, and you hardly say anything. I'd expected you to be more helpful, to do more – and you don't seem to be helping. I feel worse now than when we started'. Vesna feels a little defensive – what is it that Maria expects? Did she make explicit her role in the first place – and if so did she stick to it?

In supervision, Vesna is so concerned with her own feelings of incompetence that she feels she has lost the plot with Maria, and doubts whether she can help. Indeed, she is not now sure *how* to help. Vesna is, in fact, feeling very clientish! In this scenario, the counsellor's personal fears and anxieties have sabotaged movement within the counselling process, and the counsellor is left feeling slightly bruised. She is not sure what intervention it is now appropriate to make.

Challenging generally is one of the trickier areas of counselling, and counsellors and clients are notorious for playing 'here we go round the mulberry bush'. This can feel productive; they dance a little dance of intimacy – moving closer, drawing away, twirling around, touching, backing off; they dance their way onwards and through time, learning new movements, dancing into the sunset. Sometimes, however, their dance goes round and round the mulberry bush – a lovely movement, very enlivening and getting nowhere fast.

Dancing round the mulberry bush is easy to do because people *can* enjoy talking about themselves immensely. Have you ever had that experience where someone is actually listening carefully to what you have to say? You may feel that your issues are important, your emotions valid, and your perspective worthwhile. For many people, this is an uncommon occurrence in their everyday life, and is extremely enriching. Thus it can be tempting, when in the client seat,

to repeatedly add on to the story in 'and another thing' vein. And if the counsellor is curious, sympathetic, unassertive, or into diagnosis, they will become stuck for a strategy to 'move the client on'. When they try and move towards the future, the client will tell them more of what they don't want, more of what they've always had. While a sense of plateau to integrate change is no bad thing, the clue to the mulberry bush is the never-ending repetition, the endless new aspects to the story. A sure sign to introduce a change of pace and direction. Chapter 4 offers pragmatic instruments to help to make this happen.

When words are not enough!

In Chapter 5 we outline some perspectives on working creatively with clients who do not respond well to 'traditional' communication methods. Counsellors are taught, by and large, how crucial it is for people to verbally express their emotions, at least in the first instance. The counsellor, traditionally, responds with verbal empathy. This can, however, be too narrow or even inappropriate a response, for different reasons.

The group of people for whom verbal expression and empathic response is not helpful is wide and varied. We have worked with people with off-the-scale IQs and people with learning difficulties who are very cognitive; it was just not their style to talk the language of emotions. Sometimes counsellors can struggle too long in the quest for verbal, accurate, empathy above all else.

In these situations, using other media such as art, music, photography, and even basic cognitive empathy – an agreement to honour the cognitive as being as important as emotions – is useful, and we will briefly explore these options, noting that there is a great deal of literature now which addresses creative methods of helping.

Off the beaten track

In our experience, both practically and in literature reviews, counsellors are seldom taught about the implication of issues of mental health and illness in their work. It is not, for example, a good idea to open up in one fell swoop all the hitherto repressed emotions of a person with a tendency to psychosis. Unpopular as such terminology as mental illness and psychosis might be at times, we feel strongly that it is ethically and practically desirable for counsellors to have a sound working knowledge of issues common to mental health and of the possible side effects and limitations of certain medications.

Hence, drawing particularly on Graham's broad experiences in psychiatry, we have added a new chapter, Chapter 6, to begin to explore some of these issues.

I haven't got a clue how you feel!

In Chapter 7 we explore the theme of values from different perspectives. From time to time, counsellors encounter the polar opposite to identification, and find it very difficult to recognise any aspects of the client's story, feelings or context. This may occur when the type of behaviour or situation is alien, the values different. One client of ours had very strong religious beliefs, so that his extreme unhappiness within his marriage was held in tension alongside his love for his god whom he sought to obey. He felt that he had no option but to stay true to the marriage vows despite his unhappiness. It was difficult to understand such commitment to a set of values which were so restricting of this man's potential, and not to be tempted to see the religious belief as an 'excuse' rather than a 'valid' reason for keeping the situation the same.

Such non-recognition may occur within the ordinary and predictable aspects of life when the counsellor has never dealt with a specific situation before. This may be a situation where someone is revealing abusive behaviour, substance abuse, dishonest dealings: indeed, it may be any situation, and these examples are made only to illustrate, not to stereotype – counsellors will have had a range of personal experiences just like anyone else. The point is that we all find 'new' situations, and it is easy to confuse a new 'theme' with unnecessary difficulties. Equally, we all do live by our own moral codes, whether overt or covert. It is useful to remember that clients are whole people, for whom the named problem is only one aspect of their experience. If we believe in some aspect of commonality between human beings, then we all understand what it is to have an emotion or a thought; we do not have to have had the same experiences to work well. On the other hand, we need to respect values.

When we trained counsellors in Kuwait in 1993, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion, we were faced with a number of quite new situations. We were advised to read various books in order to orientate ourselves and understand the culture, but chose instead to go 'cold' into the situation. Perhaps going cold should be reframed as 'warm' – we went with open hearts and humility, and learned our way through confidence in our ethos and a willingness to negotiate issues and situations. Our overriding belief system was that the commonalities in our humanity were greater than the differences, and so the

'new situations', the 'new culture', were a forum for learning and sharing, rather than an inhibitor.

When we introduced the idea of personal development and self-determination to our group of trainees, we encountered a degree of perplexity – why should professionals need to explore their own personal issues in order to offer a skilled and specific service? A great question, reflecting not only the values of the Kuwaiti culture, but also pertinent to the development of the profession. We were privileged to participate in an exciting and educational process from which we learned a great deal. The chapter explores the different types of issues raised by questions of values.

A funny thing happened to me on the way through life – anybody know a good counsellor?

In Chapter 8, we look at how and where counselling originated and contextualise the function it serves. We also invite the reader to explore the limitations of counselling, and its downsides. We recognise that counselling is prolific: it seems to be recommended almost willy-nilly, for every ailment, every ennui, of everyday life. In locating counselling as a social practice we make overt some of its foundations and alert the reader to a full range of potential consequences.

What is counselling?

Chapter 9 explores differences and similarities between counselling terms, how we know that counselling works, how we differentiate between activities, and how we reconcile thorny theoretical debates. Since the last edition of this book, the term coaching has been extensively coined to join the ranks of other psychologically-based humanistic activities, and we look at how this might fit into the range of 'helping' activities which draw upon similar skills and ethical parameters to counselling.

My genuine response to you is 'you are a male chauvinist pig'

In Chapter 10, we explore some of the paradoxes within counselling, such as the impossibility of accurate empathy, the limitations of

unconditional positive regard and the blurred edges of genuineness, and try to make some sense of the demands of such lofty concepts in reality. This chapter remains in its original form.

Feedback has suggested that this theoretical discussion has been useful in understanding practical situations. For example, as a novice counsellor, Janice worked with a heterosexual couple in couples counselling. One day, the husband arrived alone. When asked where his wife was, he laughed and said that he'd given her a good slap, and she was too bruised to come out. Janice went completely blank in terms of sense of purpose, and issued him with several challenges which reflected her *genuine* responses: the emotion of anger, an inability to offer positive regard, responses which were sadly lacking in any skill. She suggested that it would be pointless for the client to come back on his own, at which point he left. Janice felt proud of 'not putting up with any nonsense', and of being true to herself – for about two minutes.

Emerging from the complete blank regarding the client needs and outcomes, realisation dawned that she had acted in such a way that the man's wife was more at risk than ever. The contract had been blown, and neither party returned. Janice had hit her own sticky moment, for reasons which she only understood sometime later, and had confused this with a sense of being genuine. A salutary lesson, and in Chapter 10 we try to demystify these core conditions that we can't always live up to.

Chapter 11: trained, suited and booted – what does professionalisation mean?

This chapter is new to the second edition, and explores the professionalisation process and some of the nuances within it. What exactly does it mean to be a professional? What does it take to become one? What is the profession anyway, and how is it developing?

In our first edition, we noted the example of a lighter sticky moment for Janice, who used to use a rocking-chair when counselling. She had no idea just how engaged she was with the client, until she rocked so enthusiastically that she rocked all the way over and landed inelegantly. Fortunately, both parties found this to be hilarious, and at least she can say that she remained 'genuine' throughout the ungainly exercise of putting skirts down, dusting herself off, and resuming counselling! Being professional, to us, suggests working within clear principles while shying away from being precious.

Becoming a professional counsellor is an interesting journey: we look at a model of development which may be useful when acknowledging ups and downs of embarking on this journey, and which may

be useful for supervision. You will notice that in some of the examples we use in the book, we refer to 'new' counsellors, 'novice' counsellors, 'experienced' counsellors. We do not mean to patronise at any point by this use of language, merely to acknowledge that there may be slight differences in the kind of issues that counsellors have at different times, and that there is such a process as 'counsellor development'. Enthusiastic novice counsellors can be just as, even more, effective than more experienced counsellors: the point is that experience suggests that we might hit different types of issues at different points in professional development.

In wider terms, the process of professionalisation has progressed considerably since the first edition. Virtual counselling is new and brings some interesting challenges – and can you ultimately be counselled by a computer? The status of the profession has risen, alongside the price of counselling courses and books, and the establishment of awards for 'outstanding' professionals – does this make for more exclusivity? We will also be noting the issues around accreditation and registration of the profession, and some of the paradoxes which have ensued.

The map is not the territory – but without it we'll get lost

Finally, Chapter 12 will reiterate the principles of counselling practice in the form of a four-stage model. We hope that by this time your interest will have been captured and your soul liberated to further your own practice and your own arguments.

Whatever else, we hope that this is an enjoyable and informative book for you, that it will tap into questions that you already have, suggest new ones, and provide some ideas and guidelines that help you to practise in a way that is ethical, engaging and healthy for both you and your client.

Notes

- 1 Two comments are noteworthy here. One is that many counsellors, including ourselves, do make careful counselling contracts with friends from time to time. Secondly, we are aware that the term 'friend' represents a whole load of understandings. Some people regard as friends those with whom they share humour and experience of some situations, while others go through a lifetime regarding themselves as having a very small number of friends, those with whom they offer a unique intimacy.
- 2 See, for example, Ingram (1991) for a clear exposition on roles.

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the inside story: or trapped and alone with the couch ...

Abstract: This chapter is about what can happen to a counsellor—simply because of the job. We explore some of the simple pitfalls which happen for no other reason than because counsellors are human. We highlight some of these ‘normal’ problems and offer perspectives to help avoid some of the feelings of inadequacy and helplessness that we all feel sometimes in this job. We explore some of the difficulties facing the fledgling counsellor while reminding the more experienced that these can happen to you too! We cover identification and its potential results, such as contamination, control of content, and advice giving and explore such sticky moments as voyeurism, anxiety and distraction. Finally, we acknowledge that there are even dangers in training to be a counsellor!

The life of a counsellor can be pretty tough and pretty lonely. The tendency to isolation can be seriously underestimated by bright and sparkly-eyed candidates on an introduction to counselling course. After all, counselling is about working with people, learning with people, so that at first sight it might seem like a very interactive job. However, those of you who have spent some time in the profession will recognise various experiences which belie the simplicity of this belief. Counselling is interactive, yet in a very specific way which is different from the usual rules of personal encounters. It does have a certain status, it does initially provoke appreciation from successful clients, and it can result in a certain glow of self-esteem when we appreciate ourselves. However, such rewards may not be continuous nor great enough to preclude some ‘bad days’, and the more surprising experiences of isolation which can occur.

The nature of counselling entails high levels of confidentiality. This in itself may lead to a sense of isolation if counsellors ‘box off’ their work into ‘no-go’ areas. For example, in ‘normal life’ and relationships the cliché ‘had a good day at the office’, or some version thereof,

gives an opportunity for people to share some of their experiences of the day within their close relationships. If this question is met with 'I'm sorry I can't talk to you about that', then there is an increasing possibility that the other in the relationship feels excluded from an important area of their loved one's life. For the counsellor, it can become a burden when their day's work has had effects on them personally, whether to do with graphic accounts of powerful experiences, or to do with some aspect of self-reflection into which we are so relentlessly encouraged. When such effects are screened off within normally intimate relationships, then, distancing may occur for one party in the relationship, and isolation for the other.

The potential for isolation is exacerbated when the counsellor is also working without agency support, for example, when she/he works as an independent or as a single worker without a team. Any sense of frustration, helplessness, or that 'locked-in' feeling can be overpowering and debilitating. This is acknowledged in that one of the necessary benefits of supervision is the great relief felt when one is able to 'tell someone'. The burden of confidentiality can weigh heavy, not always because of the impact of the content of the disclosure one holds inside, but simply *because* it has to remain inside. The 'trapped and alone' syndrome can be made worse on occasions when you may feel that you are not helping 'enough', that perhaps someone else could be 'helping more', that there seems to be no way forward, or simply that you are 'upset' by what you are hearing.

Moreover, counsellors are asked to do something as part of their job which is reasonably unique, i.e. to 'self-develop' towards self-knowledge and authenticity. We might challenge this imperative; can counselling be done by an actor who knows how to operate certain communication styles at any one time? Do we really have to be 'ahead' of our clients? Are we in danger of positioning the counsellor as some sort of idealised self, some role model for the rest of humanity to aspire to?¹ Such arguments aside, the reality is that, currently, counselling imposes an imperative to counsellors to try to 'work themselves out', or at the very least to monitor themselves for 'what's going on', and how it affects the client. The effect of this can be a strong self-preoccupation which can be rather absorbing and extremely demanding, so that the counsellor begins to see the world only in relation to themselves. How exhausting!

All of these types of feelings have been experienced by us or disclosed to us in supervision. We hope that by simply noting them, we may be helping you to realise that you are not alone. Such feelings are seldom aired in public amongst counsellors, sometimes in supervision, and indeed rarely to friends or loved ones (who might notice the phenomenon before we do). It would appear that there are no books

that deal adequately with the internal mental life of the counsellor, or indeed, on how the work may affect the counsellors' interpersonal relationships². The best one can hope for is that counselling training or supervision raises awareness of this phenomenon. Through such media, you may be advised to undertake personal counselling when or if the nature of the work distresses you.

This is only one strategy however, and one which continues to focus on your internal life. Useful at times, but we can't emphasise enough that it's equally useful to go on holiday, cut down hours, talk to a friend, have a passionate weekend away, get engrossed in music, film, books, sailing, dancing – whatever you find relaxing, and whatever has a different focus. Often, the degree of isolation felt can be paradoxically connected to how involved you are in the 'counselling world', and in intense self-exploration.

So, our point is that counsellors sometimes will feel trapped and alone. This may be within the counselling relationship, it may be within the general work context, or it may be to do with effects or demands of the work on self. We would suggest, then, that counsellors review some of the principles which they adhere to in the light of the following questions:

- Are my contracts of confidentiality with my clients honest and realistic? Part of one of our contracts now is that the counsellor will discuss aspects of their work with their supervisor, with an occasional consultant, but also with a trusted friend/lover, albeit with anonymity.
- Am I as in touch with other people as I want to be?
- Do I have a network of people who I can turn to simply to have a chat about the nature of the work?
- Do I see the number of clients who I really want to, or are they disproportionate to the rest of my life?
- Have I got a life, or is it all wrapped up in striving to personally develop, in my therapy sessions, in my reflective meditation, in my quest for self-knowledge?
- Do I step back and see counselling as only one part of a much wider existence? Is there life without counselling?

In the rest of this chapter, we will try to elucidate some of the more common responses to and effects of the counselling work. In addition to examining the effects that the counsellors' intrapersonal issue can have on the process of counselling, we hope to present a realistic picture of what is and isn't humanly possible in counselling. Our experience is that counsellors can set such incredible expectations that they are bound to struggle. We also include some thoughts on coping with the more unpleasant aspects of the work.

Firstly, we look at identification, and how it may lead to contamination of understanding, to advice giving, and controlling of the

clients' material. Secondly, the issue of voyeurism, or how 'curiosity killed the counselling' occurs. Thirdly, the chapter focuses on anxiety, what causes it, maintains it, and how it can be controlled or dissipated. This section also looks at what we call 'the saviour syndrome'³ and the issues of stress and overwork which have become known as 'burnout'.⁴ We consider a list of possible distractions and categorise these into physiological, emotional/psychological and physical. Some possible antidotes or strategies worth pursuing are considered. We would emphasise at this point that all of the suggestions we make in regard to intrapersonal issues are included to stimulate thought rather than direct you to our particular prescription of what should be done. We do, however, use statements of principle as a means of differentiating counselling from other activities. Where these occur, they may be seen as a guiding light, resound as a motto to be remembered, or simply be an additional thought which stands alone. It is our wish to enable practitioners to address the principles of practice.

Finally, and new to this edition of the book, we offer some thoughts on counselling training, reviewing what we learned in training, and the effect it might have had on us. We sometimes wonder if what is offered in training is a pretty good indoctrination: are we the person we were before we 'trained' and, if not, are we better for it? Although this self-reflective torture can probably do little good after the event, it is interesting to look at the paradoxes and see whether we are still locked in to everything we were taught, or whether we have evolved, loosened up, got sloppier, become more open minded or ... ? Blank minds and the occasional sticky moment might actually be better than having become the counselling automaton.

Identification

I know just how you feel and I want you to get better ...

It is important to try to remember who has the problem. Clients' issues can be disabling and distressing if you identify with them, or indeed the source of a vicarious pleasure when they 'do well'. Many counsellors disclose issues of identification which they are finding troublesome. It is almost as if they have brought the issue to supervision for permission to refer clients on. Clients disclose their responses to life events: bereavements, separations, abuse, betrayal, anger and confusion. If you too are in a comparable circumstance or situation, it is not surprising that difficulties can arise. Counsellors are human beings with the same repertoire of emotions and potential for distress as their clients.