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Counselling Skills For Dummies® 2nd Edition

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Introduction

Counselling skills are often referred to as ‘active listening skills’, which makes them sound simple – after all, everyone knows how to listen, don’t they? In reality, though, the following is true:

- ✓ Listening isn’t so simple after all.
- ✓ Truly listening is a very powerful tool.
- ✓ Finding out how to truly listen is intriguing, worthwhile, and exciting.
- ✓ You can discover a lot about yourself in the process.
- ✓ Active listening skills improve helping (and other) conversations and your relationships as a result.

Active listening skills are usually associated with a helping role but they are the foundation for helping conversations in many different contexts where interpersonal skills are important.

About This Book

For most of my adult life, and even earlier, I have been fascinated by human beings and found great personal satisfaction and a sense of achievement from helping people when they’re distressed or anxious. My goal in this book is to impart my enthusiasm and enduring interest for helping people with their concerns through the medium of the listening relationship. My own experience has been that discovering how to help people with their difficulties is a life-long process, because people and their situations are complex. This stretched me and kept me hooked even when the going got tough. What I didn’t expect at the outset was how much I would find out about myself, and how much I needed to discover about myself to be a better listener. What you will notice in this book is the emphasis on growing your self-awareness as well as increasing your knowledge and developing your skills.

Of course I hope that this book is going to help make you a brilliant listening helper, but there are some things it cannot achieve. This book can't

- ✔ **Provide you with direct practice.** You need to find people to practise on, which poses an ethical dilemma (this is only the beginning of the ethical dilemmas in this area of work!). Counselling skills can be very powerful tools for opening people's emotions. You need to be aware of this and decide whether the other person is a willing participant and whether using your developing skills is likely to help.
- ✔ **Give you feedback, which is vital for your progress.** I do encourage you, however, to practise and find ways of getting feedback from others about how you're doing with your listening skills.
- ✔ **Tell you absolutely everything you need to know.** I've had to be selective because this fascinating activity contains so much information.
- ✔ **Make you a counsellor.** Listening skills are an important part of counselling (sometimes called psychotherapy, or just therapy). This book isn't about being a counsellor. You may have ambitions to become a counsellor and if so, I hope this book helps you along the way to deciding whether this is a rewarding career for you. Counsellor training courses usually require you to have grounding in the theory and *practice* of counselling skills in an environment where you can practise and get feedback on your developing skills from willing (well mostly!) participants. You can find many counselling skills courses in Further and Higher Education colleges and from private providers around the country.

Throughout the book I use the terms *listening helper* or *helper* to refer to you (and me) and *help-seeker* or *speaker* to refer to the person who needs to talk. The phrases *counselling skills*, *listening skills*, and *active listening skills* are used interchangeably to mean the set of skills that contribute to effective listening help. I have tried to use everyday terms but whenever doing so isn't possible, I explain what the technical terms mean. Web addresses are set in monospace. Even-numbered chapters use female pronouns and odd-numbered chapters are male, to be fair to both genders!

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I assume a few things about you, the reader. I assume that:

- ✔ You're not a counsellor, but you're in a position at work or elsewhere where people talk to you about issues and problems. Or perhaps you are a counsellor and want to revisit your active listening skills.
- ✔ You're willing to be an explorer, a detective, and a reflector. The process of developing understanding is like a journey of discovery.

- ✔ You're a person who's interested in other human beings. You can acquire each individual counselling skill, and 'do' it passably. But being an effective listening helper is more than being a skilled technician – you need to base the skills in positive, personal qualities.
- ✔ You're probably reading this book because you're interested in other people, and maybe in how you yourself tick. However, even if you're reading this book because someone told you that you need to learn how to listen, or to get some counselling skills training, you can gain something valuable if you're willing to reflect on yourself.
- ✔ You have some listening skills already, and maybe some things seem basic to you. You're an individual with different experiences and skills than the next person who picks up this book. Certain parts of the book probably appeal more to you than other parts, depending on your personal interests.
- ✔ You and I and the people you want to help are essentially the same. Most people are prone to being vulnerable, erratic, under-confident, helpless, defensive, and so on – even if you're lucky enough for this to be only some of the time.

Given that you've picked up this book, you're likely to find that some of these statements apply to you:

- ✔ You're interested in and intrigued by people in a general way.
- ✔ People seem to turn to you for advice or just to talk to.
- ✔ You gain satisfaction from helping someone who talks to you about being distressed, vulnerable, or worried.
- ✔ You sometimes feel distressed or worried, or are puzzled by your own reactions.
- ✔ You are in a role that brings you into contact with distressed people.
- ✔ You sometimes have frustrating conversations.
- ✔ You're in a role where understanding people through listening to them can help them and you.

If any of these statements is true for you, then you'll find that acquiring and developing counselling skills is helpful.

Icons Used in This Book



Throughout the margins of this book, you see icons that highlight particular types of information:

This icon marks stories from my own experience.



This icon draws attention to important points you want to remember.



This book is full of detailed suggestions and ideas for dealing with different situations. The Tip icon highlights particular suggestions that can help your development as a listening helper.



These exercises help you think about the topic at hand. Often I ask you to remember or imagine a situation so that you can put yourself in the position of a help-seeker. Sometimes I ask you to rehearse a situation in your imagination.



This icon alerts you to potential dangers in the listening endeavour as a whole and in using particular skills. By being aware of these pitfalls you're better equipped to avoid them.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading right now, this product also comes with some access-anywhere goodies on the Web. Check out the free Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/counsellingskillsuk, featuring advice on the framework of a helping encounter, understanding your responsibilities as a counsellor, taking care of yourself as a counsellor, and more.

Where to Go from Here

You can start at the beginning of this book and read it from cover to cover – the chapters are organised in a logical sequence – but few people read reference books in this way. What may work best from the perspective of your individual development as a listening helper is to start in a section that interests you, or that you have a pressing need to understand. Within each chapter, you find links to other chapters that can contribute to understanding the topic that interests you.

For example, if you're a person who likes a structure to guide you, start out with the three-stage model (see Chapters 6 and 9-11), which I use as one framework in this book, and also the BEST-I BEST-RU model (see Chapters 12 and Appendix A), which is another framework I use.

Alternatively, you may be more interested in reading case examples, so you may want to start with Appendix A. Perhaps you're struggling with some helping conversations right now and want some practical guidance. If so, Chapters 9, 10, and 11 are for you.

Maybe you wonder what it is about you that keeps getting you involved in helping situations, or why you have difficulty listening sometimes. Flip to Chapter 2.

You can also look at the Table of Contents to get an idea of where to find what you need, or you can look up a particular topic of interest in the Index.

Part I

Focusing on Yourself First



For Dummies can help you get started with a huge range of subjects. Visit www.dummies.com to learn more and do more with *For Dummies*.

In this part . . .

- ✔ Learn to be comfortable with yourself, and know your strengths and limitations before you start using and developing your listening skills to help other people.
- ✔ Find out why knowing as much about yourself as possible is such a crucial step in learning how to help others.
- ✔ Discover strategies to get to know yourself better, including addressing your personal prejudices and focusing on your personal development.
- ✔ Understand why taking care of yourself physically, mentally and emotionally is really important and can help you take better care of others.
- ✔ Pick up the necessary know-how to become a safe counselling practitioner, even when dealing with people in crisis or at risk.

Chapter 1

Introducing Counselling Skills

In This Chapter

- ▶ Developing as a listening helper
 - ▶ Realising that self-understanding is essential
 - ▶ Discovering the challenges of ethical practice
 - ▶ Preparing to understand others
-

In all sorts of work and personal situations, you come across people (family, friends, work colleagues, employees, and others) who are experiencing some kind of personal difficulty or dilemma, or simply need to review an aspect of their life. The task of listening to and helping such a person is made easier and more productive by using counselling skills within a supporting framework. These skills can even help in other situations, such as when the other person is your boss or with an annoying neighbour. By developing your capacity to use these skills, you can:

- ✔ Have fewer frustrating conversations.
- ✔ Understand better where the other person is coming from.
- ✔ Understand your own reactions better.
- ✔ Manage the listening process more effectively.

Using counselling skills in a helping relationship enables help-seekers to become less distressed and to lead more constructive, satisfying lives.

Developing as a listening helper and going through the helping process are often depicted as journeys because people can feel transformed, as if they've travelled a significant distance. Like all journeys, you'll face frustrations and you may wonder why you ever set off in the first place but, because human beings are complex and using counselling skills is challenging, you have a fascinating and rewarding journey ahead. In this chapter I walk you through this journey.

Knowing Yourself to Understand Others

The saying goes that to understand another person you have to walk a long way in his shoes. Although this is a neat way to say you need to *feel* what being the other person is like, you need to have a good look at your own feet first – walking a few miles in someone else’s shoes may damage his shoes and hurt your own feet into the bargain.

You bring your life experiences, attributes, and ways of thinking and feeling to the helping relationship and have a significant impact on it, both positive and negative. For this reason I frequently explore thoughts about personal development and self-understanding in this book.

Chapter 2 focuses on self-development and ways of taking it further, and Chapter 7 puts the spotlight on your defences, but I refer to your self-understanding throughout. In Chapters 8 and 9, I explain the Core Conditions which are fundamental to the approach of this book. These conditions are key qualities expressed in terms of skills but they’re more than just a skills checklist. Being able to demonstrate the Core Conditions to a help-seeker means developing your self-knowledge and self-awareness.

Working Safely and Ethically

Although working as a listening helper is rewarding, it can pose some challenges and dilemmas and drain you of energy at times. In Chapter 3, I talk about the importance of making sure you take care of yourself and get support for your work. Self-care contributes to being a safe helper.

Another part of working safely is reflecting on what makes for good practice. Helping situations routinely throw up ethical dilemmas. Chapter 4 gets you thinking about your practice, risks, and protective measures, including an ethical decision-making model. Good practice is also informed by research and the influence of research findings is reflected in this book.

Appendix A considers some case studies and ethical dilemmas, while some of the things that can go wrong are explored in Chapter 16. Chapter 15 looks at the influence of your role and setting and prepares you for different types of helping conversation, such as by telephone.

Being a Listening Helper

Think of your development and work as a listening helper as a journey: travelling with a companion in the helping relationship. The vehicle for the trip is

the helping relationship – a safe environment which contains, supports, and conveys the help-seeker to his destination.



Some things you read and hear may trigger uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, so take care of yourself.

Counselling skills are the nuts and bolts, the engine, of the helping relationship, while the fuel is the motivation and energy of both parties in the process. In the helping relationship, you assist the help-seeker to get somewhere by helping him to work out the final destination and how to get there, using your growing understanding of him, of yourself as map-reader and guide, and of the process of the journey. These tasks involve certain skills and knowledge, but most importantly require particular attributes and qualities. You are encouraged to reflect on these in Chapter 6. Reflection is a key part of being a listening helper. You also need to know your role and how being a listening helper may affect you; I explore both these aspects in Chapter 5.



Counselling skills are also referred to as *active listening skills*. 'Active' denotes that the helping relationship is not just about listening, but is concerned with *demonstrating* that you are listening carefully and attentively.

Your journey as a listening helper

The journey, whether as help-seeker or as aspiring or practising listening helper, can be daunting but it is also life-enhancing. As you explore your development as a listening helper, bear in mind that you'll go through a cyclical process:

- ✓ You start with enthusiasm and excitement and blissful ignorance.
- ✓ As you begin to develop, you hit a depressive, under-confident period of realising how much you don't know.
- ✓ As you continue to grow, your confidence starts to return, but in a self-conscious way.
- ✓ You reach the point where you almost instinctively know what to do without constant checking and self-questioning.
- ✓ The cycle begins again every time you challenge yourself with new developments.



You make more progress in this journey if you develop your reflective skills and maintain a regular journal that records your experiences and associated feelings, thoughts, wonderings, and so on. Look back over your writing at intervals to see how your preoccupations have changed and how you have grown. Some people draw, copy, or write poems, paste in articles and cartoons – whatever captures the imagination and emotions.

Using counselling skills or being a counsellor

Although counsellors use counselling skills, being a counsellor and being a listening helper using counselling skills are different, even though the boundary is blurred in some situations. In this book I focus on the listening helper using counselling skills. The differences are to do with a combination of time, focus, boundaries, role, and depth:

- ✓ Counselling skills are usually used as part of another primary role, such as being a teacher, youth worker, welfare worker, advice worker, or working in human resources, for example.
- ✓ Normally counselling skills sessions are short (typically 20–40 minutes) whereas counselling appointments are typically 50 minutes.
- ✓ Counselling skills sessions are less likely to be at regular intervals than counselling and are usually a short-term relationship (although the counselling skills sessions may be part of a wider relationship).
- ✓ Counselling skills are aimed at either simply listening without offering advice, or possibly focused on a specific issue with an expectation of reaching some kind of outcome by the end of the session. Counselling is usually working on underlying issues and less likely to be interested in an immediate outcome.
- ✓ Counselling has clearer boundaries which define certain limits of the relationship, distinguishing it from other relationships. For example, confidentiality and time boundaries are stricter and the counsellor is unlikely to have another relationship with, or dual role, with his client.
- ✓ Normally when you're in a role in which you use counselling skills but you're not being a counsellor, you work at a relatively superficial level. This statement may seem to denigrate the importance of the counselling skills role, which this book is about. However, I say that only to highlight the fact that when you're in the position of using your counselling skills, you generally function in another primary role, such as the aforementioned teacher, welfare worker, and so on, so you can't afford the time and commitment to delve deeper.

If you are interested in continuing your listening helper development by becoming a counsellor, check out Appendix B for more useful information.



An important feature of all listening help is that the helper doesn't offer advice, in the sense of 'If I were you I'd do this'. Knowledge from your primary role or elsewhere may mean you can inform a help-seeker about choices available to him, but never advise someone what to do.