What are basic counselling skills?

What is a counselling skill? One application of the word ‘skills’ pertains to areas of skill: for instance, listening skills or disclosing skills. Another application refers to level of competence, for instance, how strong your skills are in a particular area. Competence in a skill is best viewed not as an either/or matter in which you either possess or do not possess a skill. Rather, within a skills area, it is preferable to think of helpers as possessing different levels of strength. In all skills areas you are likely to possess a mixture of levels of strength. For instance, in the skills area of listening, you may be stronger at understanding clients, but less strong at showing your understanding. Similarly, in just about all areas of their functioning, clients will possess a mixture of skills of differing levels of strength.

A third application of the word ‘skill’ relates to the knowledge and sequence of choices entailed in implementing a given skill. The essential element of any skill is the ability to make and implement sequences of choices to achieve objectives. For instance, if you are to be good at listening deeply and accurately to clients, you have to make and implement effective choices in this skills area. The object of counselling skills training and supervision is to help trainees, in the skills areas targeted by their training programmes, move more in the direction of making choices that reflect strength. For example, in the skills area of active listening the objective would be to enable you to make stronger choices in the process not only of understanding clients but also in showing that understanding to them.

When thinking of any area of helper or client communication, there are two main considerations: first, what are the components of skilled external behaviour and, second, what interferes with or enhances enacting that behaviour. Thus, a counselling skill like active listening consists of both skilled interpersonal communication and skilled intrapersonal mental processing. One approach to understanding this is to acknowledge that outer behaviour originates in the mind and that, as a consequence, both thinking and behaviour are fundamentally mental processes. However, here I distinguish between two main categories of helper and client skills. First, there are communication and action skills, or skills that entail external behaviour. Second, there are mind skills, or skills that entail internal behaviour. You may wonder why I do not talk
about feelings skills and physical reactions skills. The reason for this is that feelings and physical reactions are essentially part of people’s instinctual or animal nature and are not skills in themselves. However, helpers and clients can influence how they feel and physically react by how they communicate/act and think.

COMMUNICATION AND ACTION SKILLS

Communication and action skills involve observable behaviours. They are what people do and how they do it rather than what and how they feel and think. For instance, it is one thing for you to feel concern for clients, and another to act on this feeling. How do you communicate to clients and act to show sympathy and compassion for them? You need to do so with your words, voice and body language. Communication and action skills vary by area of application: for instance, listening skills, questioning skills and challenging skills. Box 2.1 presents the five main ways in which helpers and clients can send communication and action skills messages.

**BOX 2.1  FIVE MAIN WAYS OF SENDING COMMUNICATION/ACTION SKILLS MESSAGES**

- **Verbal messages** Messages that people send with words.
- **Vocal messages** Messages that people send through their voices: for example, through volume, articulation, pitch, emphasis and speech rate.
- **Body messages** Messages that people send with their bodies: for instance, through gaze, eye contact, facial expression, posture, gestures, physical proximity and clothes and grooming.
- **Touch messages** A special category of body messages. Messages that people send with touch through the parts of the body that they use, what parts of another’s body they touch, how gentle or firm they are, and whether or not they have permission.
- **Taking action messages** Messages that people send when they are not face-to-face with clients, for example, sending letters, e-mails or invoices.

MIND SKILLS

In the last 50 years or so, there has been a major trend in counselling and psychotherapy towards trying to change clients’ self-defeating thoughts and mental processes as a way of helping them to feel and act better. These
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approaches are known as ‘the cognitive therapies’. The same insights can be applied to your thoughts and mental processes as you both learn and use counselling skills.

You can learn counselling skills and assist clients much more effectively if you harness your mind’s potential. How can you control your thoughts so that you can beneficially influence how you communicate? First, you can understand that you have a mind with a capacity for meta-cognitive thinking – or thinking about thinking – that you can develop. Second, you can become much more efficient in thinking about your thinking if you view your mental processes in terms of skills that you can train yourself to exercise and control. Third, in daily life as well as in counselling skills training, you can assiduously practise using their mind skills to influence your communication.

Counselling skills involve mental processing both to guide external behaviour and to ensure thinking that supports rather than undermines skilled external communication. Let’s take the skill of active listening. To some extent it is easy to describe the central elements of the external communication involved. On paper, these external communication skills may appear straightforward. However, most counselling skills trainees and many experienced counsellors and helpers struggle to listen well. The question then arises: ‘If the external communication skills of listening well are so relatively easy to outline, why don’t trainees and experienced helpers just do them?’ The simple answer is that your mind can both enhance and get in the way of your external communication. Thus, counselling skills consist of both mind and communication skills.

Box 2.2 provides descriptions of three central mental processes or mind skills. These skills are derived from the work of leading cognitive therapists, such as Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis. These mind skills are relevant to clients and you alike. The contents of Chapters 19, 20 and 21 of this book, focusing on strategies for changing clients’ thinking in these mind skills areas, also apply to changing your thinking.

BOX 2.2 THREE CENTRAL MIND SKILLS

Creating self-talk Instead of talking to themselves negatively before, during and after specific situations, people can acknowledge that they have choices and make coping self-statements that assist them to stay calm and cool, establish their goals, coach them in what to do, and affirm their strengths, skills and support factors. In addition, people can use self-talk to create visual images that support their verbal self-statements.

(Continued)
Creating rules

People’s unrealistic rules make irrational demands on them, others and the environment: for instance, ‘I must always be happy’, ‘Others must look after me’ and ‘My environment should not contain any suffering’. Instead they can develop realistic or preferential rules: for instance, ‘I prefer to be happy much of the time, but it is unrealistic to expect this all the time.’

Creating perceptions

People can learn to test the reality of their perceptions rather than jump to conclusions. They can distinguish between fact and inference and make their inferences as accurate as possible.

In reality, mind skills tend to overlap. For instance, all of the skills involve self-talk. However, here self-talk refers to self-statements relevant to coping with specific situations. Interrelationships between skills can also be viewed on the dimension of depth. Arguably, counsellors or clients who believe in the rule ‘I must always be happy’ are more prone to perceiving events as negative than those who do not share this rule.

FEELINGS AND PHYSICAL REACTIONS

To a large extent, you are what you feel. Important feelings include happiness, interest, surprise, fear, sadness, anger and disgust or contempt. Dictionary definitions of feelings tend to use words like ‘physical sensation’, ‘emotions’ and ‘awareness’. All three of these words illustrate a dimension of feelings. Feelings as physical sensations or as physical reactions represent people’s underlying animal nature. People are animals first, persons second. As such they need to learn to value and live with their underlying animal nature. The word emotions implies movement. Feelings are processes. People are subject to a continuous flow of biological experiencing. Awareness implies that people can be conscious of their feelings. However, at varying levels and in different ways, they may also be out of touch with them.

Physical reactions both represent and accompany feelings and, in a sense, are indistinguishable. For example, bodily changes associated with anxiety can include galvanic skin response: detectable electrical changes taking place in the skin, raised blood pressure, a pounding heart and a rapid pulse, shallow and rapid breathing, muscular tension, drying of the mouth, stomach problems such as ulcers, speech difficulties such as stammering, sleep difficulties and sexual problems such as complete or partial loss of desire. Other physical reactions include a slowing down of body movements when depressed and dilated eye pupils in moments of anger or sexual attraction. Sometimes people react to their physical reactions. For example, in anxiety
and panic attacks, they may first feel tense and anxious and then become even more tense and anxious because of this initial feeling.

Feelings and physical reactions are central to the helping process. You require the capacity to experience and understand both your own and your clients’ feelings. However, just because feelings represent people’s animal nature, this does not mean that you and your clients cannot act on them. In helping, three somewhat overlapping areas where feelings and accompanying physical reactions are important are: experiencing feelings, expressing feelings and managing feelings. In each of these three areas you can work with clients’ communications/actions and thoughts and mental processes to influence how they feel and physically react.

**BASIC COUNSELLING SKILLS**

Let’s get down to basics. The word ‘basic’, when used in conjunction with counselling skills, implies a repertoire of central counselling skills on which you can base your helping practice. Another related meaning of the term ‘basic’ is that of being fundamental or primary rather than advanced. The quality of the helper–client relationship is essential to successful helping encounters. Consequently, many basic skills are those that will enhance how well you and your clients connect. Such skills include understanding the client’s internal frame of reference and reflecting their feelings. Other basic skills entail helping clients to understand their problems and situations more clearly: for example, you can ask key questions about clients’ feelings, physical reactions, thoughts, communications and actions. Still other basic skills can focus on simple and straightforward ways of assisting clients to change how they think, feel, communicate and act. All helpers require basic counselling skills for relating to clients and for helping them to understand their concerns. The extent and ways in which you extend your repertoire of basic counselling skills to include skills for assisting client change is likely to be a matter of what each of you finds useful.