

# C H A P T E R 1

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## An Invitation to Counseling Work

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*If you don't know the kind of person I am and I don't know the kind of person you are a pattern that others made may prevail in the world and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.*

(“A Ritual to Read to Each Other” by William Stafford)

**Y**ou have your sights set on becoming a counselor. Your journey toward considering the counseling profession or some related work has undoubtedly been interesting and circuitous. If you are like many of the people drawn to the counseling profession, you look to this work both to better understand yourself and to learn how to work effectively with people.

## WHO BECOMES A COUNSELOR?

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People do not gravitate to the counseling profession in the same way that people choose to become insurance agents, plumbers, or corporate executives. In interviews with new students in our graduate counseling program, my colleagues and I find that behind a vague desire to “help people” there is usually a person searching for a life of more meaningful connection, both with self and with others. Often the student’s life had seemed filled with bad choices or ventures down blind alleys to dead ends, leaving the student looking for a better way to channel interpersonal energy. Sometimes individuals consider becoming counselors after overcoming some major life challenge such as addiction or a history of bad relationships. Perhaps an individual has encountered a particularly effective counselor or therapist and has a desire to follow in those footsteps. Others may have had a bad experience with counseling and concluded that it can be done better.

People do not think of this work so much as a job, or even as a career. More typically, a constellation of life experiences that demand explanation and a sense that others seek one out for assistance and emotional sustenance become driving forces leading one toward the counseling profession. Many people who come to this profession feel that they have been called to it in some fashion (Foster, 1996).

You may think of yourself as having some unique talents or gifts for understanding others. Maybe you have led a successful, outwardly exemplary work life—making lots of money and building a reputation—but have been left feeling unfulfilled and dissatisfied. You may be approaching the second half of life, where external trappings of success have become less meaningful than relationships with others and a solid sense of personal purpose. If this is the case, you, too, may be a good candidate for the counseling profession. There is ample opportunity to do work that is inherently, intrinsically rewarding—though perhaps without great financial reward.

Thus, you may come to this work from a history of personal pain or from a position of success and prominence or with a sense that you need to sharpen your intuitive interpersonal skills. All kinds of life experiences and a wide variety of motivations for wanting to become a counselor are legitimate. Any and all of these provide grist for the self-examination mill. You will want to examine your motivations because you will want to work cleanly with people, only minimally encumbered by your own unfinished business. This examination should involve both an intellectual review of your motivations and a review of the emotional issues related to your desire to do this work. Evidence (Goleman, 1995, 1998) suggests that your emotional connections to your desire for this work are at least as important as your intellectual ones.

Some people are, of course, drawn to this profession for the wrong reasons—to take advantage of others' vulnerabilities or to work out their own personal problems (Witmer & Young, 1996). While you should not be primarily involved with this profession to promote your own self-awareness and understanding, you can nevertheless take comfort in the fact that the profession can lead you toward a greater understanding of yourself. The best counselors commit themselves to life-long growth and learning (Spurling & Dryden, 1989), much of which comes via the clients they serve.

### REFLECTION EXERCISE 1.1: Why Do You Want to Be a Counselor?

Sit quietly. Think about some of the reasons, the events of your life, that steer you toward becoming a counselor. Which of those events bring warm, fond memories and feelings; which are more difficult and painful? What is it about you that will encourage others to talk about themselves personally, to look at some of the more troubling and difficult aspects of their lives? What kind of life wisdom do you bring to this professional calling?

How will all of your personal experiences help you make connections with other people? How will they help you to understand your clients' individual dilemmas? What might be some dangers in how your personal experience will affect your work with others?

Allow yourself to sit quietly for some minutes with these reflections. As your awareness returns to your everyday surroundings, take a few minutes to jot down some notes, perhaps in your journal, about your recollections and reflections. If you feel comfortable sharing some of these reflections with another, talk for a few minutes about your experience with one or two colleagues or friends. Share only that information that feels safe for you to reveal.

## THE NATURE OF THE WORK

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You are being called to a noble profession. It is a profession with many rewards and with attendant responsibilities. It is a privilege and an honor to be invited to share in some of the intimate details of another's life, and you are obliged to respect the gift that that sharing implies. But what is it, exactly, that you may anticipate being called upon to do? The reasons people seek out counselors are many and varied. Many people come for counseling to resolve some kind of personal or life problem. Usually, these people come with a genuine, positive desire to be helped, but you will also encounter the occasional client who will manipulate and con you (Kierulff, 1988). Sometimes personal problems precipitate crises, periods of deep emotional pain. People can become extremely distraught, and you may be called upon to help them through these difficult times.

With desperate people who are trying to simply stay afloat in turbulent waters, your job is to provide an emotional life raft and maybe to help find the resources for them to move toward the safer shallows. Perhaps they have marital or financial problems, or problems dealing with a child. Sometimes problems are poorly defined—just a vague dissatisfaction or feeling of emptiness or depression. The problems may be multiple, overlapping, and complex or relatively simple and easily remedied. Some people may have emotional, mental, or physical problems that severely impair their ability to function well in the world.

Whatever problems clients may feel they have, they are looking to a counselor to help make things better. If someone is in critical straits, some kind of crisis intervention may be necessary. Similarly, you may work to help people reconcile and correct serious behavioral problems. Those problems may have gotten them in trouble, and other people may have directed them toward counseling. They may have problems with drugs or with the law. Your job may be to help monitor, supervise, and support positive behavioral change. In these roles, you may be called upon to enforce rules and use leverage to keep people in treatment. The work here is most certainly not always “warm and fuzzy,” and it may run counter to what many people think of when they consider the nurturing, supportive role of the counselor. Tough enforcement of rules, however, might be the appropriate response.

People will also seek out a counselor to simply help make life better. A student wants help with course selections, or a man who wants a good job seeks out a career counselor. Much of your work here will be spent in assisting in personal growth for the people whom you serve. You may function in a kind of cheerleading or coaching role, providing suggestions and support for new courses of action. Much of this work will be in helping people to see their hidden talents and to recognize their own strengths that have gone unsupported.

Other clients of yours may function perfectly well but feel trapped within their functional lives, yearning for more but not knowing exactly what they want. A vast group of potential clients are those who are searching for personal growth and increased authenticity. They function well in their lives, may have solid jobs and intact families, and are successful by all traditional notions of the word “success.” Yet they feel incomplete, unfulfilled, and have deep longings for something more, something just out of the grasp of awareness.

Years ago, one of the pioneers of the human potential movement, Abraham Maslow (1963), suggested that this desire for growth springs inevitably from a deep-rooted fear of standing alone in the world, from acting clearly on one’s own behalf. It is a fear, he maintained, almost inherent in the human condition.

We fear our highest possibility (as well as our lower ones). We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments . . . we enjoy and even thrill to the godlike possibilities we see in ourselves at such peak moments. And yet we simultaneously shiver with weakness, awe and fear before those very same possibilities. (p. 163)

Your job as a counselor may thus be to call your client to greatness, to become an ally in the search for nobility and for the heroic that resides within us all. You may need to help some of your clients acknowledge the ways they keep themselves from becoming truly free and self-directed, the ways they have created their own little prisons, their “mind-forged manacles,” and some of the complex reasons for such retreat from real freedom. At its best, counseling is about assisting clients in responding to their particular calls to greatness. You will want your clients, to repeat the clichéd phrase, to be “the best that they can be.”

We all search for the heroic within us. When we shrink from our desires to embrace our unique talents and the gifts we might bring to the world, we are eaten from within by our own dissatisfactions and stunted growth. It is this call to greatness that we assist many of our clients in answering and that we naturally seek to answer in our own lives. Here we are called on to play a philosopher-counselor role, and it stands to reason that the questions asked by our clients are similar to those with which we grapple ourselves.

## The Analogy of Counseling as House Repair

People seek counseling for myriad reasons, and there are multiple ways you may respond. The true skill and sophistication of this work is finding an appropriate response to what is truly needed. This is the nature of our responsibility—or respond “ability”—to those with whom we work.

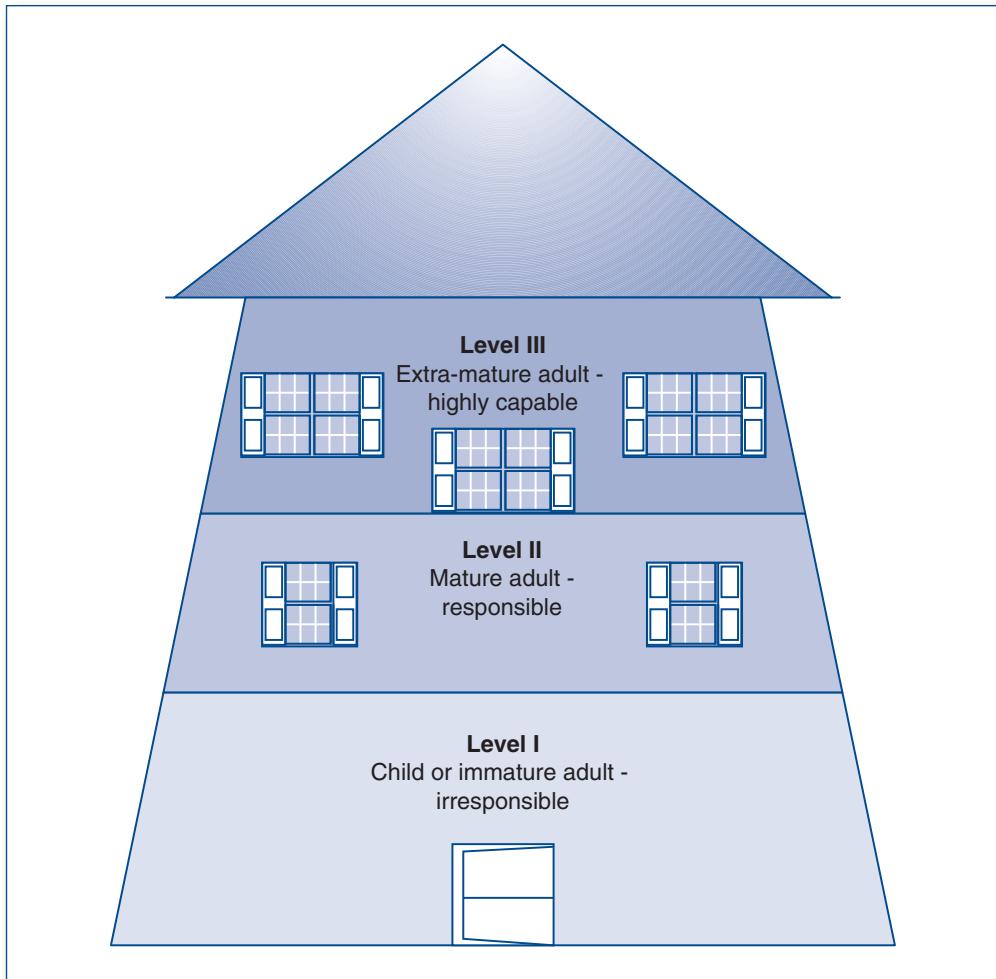
A rough analogy can be made between the counseling work we do and working on a house. You can think of helping your client as helping to make the house in which he lives a more fit place in which to live. In this analogy, the house has three levels. (See Figure 1.1)

Your client resides predominantly on one of these levels, and typically seeks counseling to make that level more comfortable or to move up to the next level. All of the reasons people need to see counselors exist somewhere within the framework of this house. Children, or immature adults with immense problems in negotiating the basic demands of daily life, might be seen as residing at Level 1, the ground floor. Those for whom questions of life meaning and self-realization are paramount live at the top floor of the house, Level 3. Most adults living self-sustaining, self-supporting lives are in the middle, at Level 2 of the house.

The counselor is like a building contractor who works with the client to improve the livability of the levels of the house where he is already residing and ultimately to build a staircase to higher levels of the house. The counselor's working tools are the essential relationship development and enhancement skills that we will examine in this book. These are fueled by the "facilitative conditions"—the empathic regard, the respect, and all of the other interpersonal ways we support our clients. As the building and repair work proceeds in counseling, the counselor is simultaneously teaching skills to the client so that eventually the client will be capable of doing routine house maintenance and repair without the counselor's help.

This analogy of house repair is a really a developmental approach to the use of counseling skills. As any student who has taken undergraduate psychology courses will probably recognize, this levels of a house analogy is similar to, and compatible with, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs model, as well as other developmental models (Ivey, Ivey, Myers, & Sweeney, 2005), Piaget's model of cognitive development (1955/1923), and Kohlberg's model of values or moral development (1962, 1981). This way of conceptualizing client problems and goals in counseling work, which builds on Maslow's ideas about the hierarchy of needs (Bruce, 1984), has been developed schematically as a foundation for planning effective counseling interventions. This developmental model of counseling interventions and its implications for helping counselors to understand and respond to specific client concerns will be developed in later chapters.

You will need to choose approaches for working with your clients that fit their specific needs and capacities for responding to what you do. Thus, although you will naturally gravitate to using interventions that fit your theoretical orientation, you should also give serious consideration to the skills and deficits your clients bring to counseling. Assessment is the focus of much of Chapter 5, and the specific ways in which your clients' needs are represented in this "house" and the types of tools (that is, skills) you will choose to help your client deal with these needs are addressed there in detail.

**Figure 1.1** House Repair Analogy

### Some Fundamental Reasons for Seeking Counseling

The reasons many people who have at least made their way out of the “basement” of the house—meaning that they are not in crisis and seem to manage life maturely—seek counseling can typically be reduced to two primary motivators. Assuming that basic physical and safety needs have been met, people want to reduce the level of fear they carry in their lives, and they want to increase the love they feel and their sense of belonging and connection with other people. They

want to decrease the fear and increase the love. For many of the people we serve, responding to these two needs is what the counseling business is all about. When people cannot satisfy their basic needs for love and belonging, anxiety, stress, and sadness are often the result (Teyber, 2000). These basic unmet needs become layered with complicated feelings and behaviors.

The counseling and psychotherapy literature is not exactly overloaded with the language of love, and it cloaks the word “fear” in diagnostic garb. The words “love” and “fear” are global, imprecise, and loaded with potential for misinterpretation. Diagnostic language is more comfortable to the professional community, and it is also more descriptive. “Phobias,” “dysfunctions,” and “anxiety” describe the strange forms into which fear can constellate itself. The language of the diagnostic manuals is helpful because its description assists appropriate intervention.

Behind the diagnoses and the treatment planning, however, the fundamental problem is oftentimes some variant of that fear theme. As Deikman (1982) suggests, “It is hard to find a neurotic symptom or a human vice that cannot be traced to the desire to possess or the fear of loss” (p. 80). Greed and the fear of loss are simply two variants of the theme of fear. The antidote to fear that counselors supply is compassion and unconditional positive regard. Your job is to help to reduce the fear, thereby increasing the capacity to comfortably encounter self and others. This may sound simple, yet it takes great wisdom and experience to do this well, clearly, and cleanly. There are many small steps, behavior changes, and insights to be made along the road to a life that is less fear-based.

You will want to be able to respond effectively to your clients, and this will require both thoughtful reflection about what is needed and compassion for them as people. It is a challenge to do this work with both heart and head. Developing this capacity to work on these multiple levels is a life’s work. It is difficult to conceive of any work that is more relevant or important, whether our clientele be CEOs or grocery store clerks, young adults in college or children in public schools, imprisoned drug addicts or patients hospitalized with mental illness.

### **A Personal Case Example**

Maybe we remember our first clients most vividly. One of my first counseling clients has always been representative of the remarkable potential for joy and reward in this work, as well as for serving as an example of how a client’s fear can be diminished if met with steadiness, understanding, and appropriate affection. Many years ago, I was a fresh and green doctoral intern at SUNY Buffalo’s College Counseling Center. Claire was my first client, an attractive, bright, student in the fine arts program.

Her first question to me was, "Are you just a graduate student?" Right off the bat, here was a question about my competence, a challenge to see how I'd respond, and behind it a fear that I might not be up to the task.

Our beginning sessions were filled with more of her confrontational challenges to my age, to my competence, and with comments about my lack of experience. She danced around any attempts I made to get her to talk more personally about herself, or even to cogently talk about what she was looking for by coming for counseling. All of this was coming from a place of fear, the fear of judgment and rejection. Fear that I wouldn't be able to handle what she yearned to reveal.

Her critical comments, intelligent and sharply to the point, often reflected my own concerns about my competence. I was acutely aware of my inexperience. Her comments were cuttingly effective, sometimes hurtful. I recall not becoming overly defensive, at least with her, and saving my complaints about Claire and my lack of experience as a counselor for sessions with my clinical supervisor, Faith. I just rode through the sniping and bluffed not being hurt on more than one occasion. Not incidentally, I enjoyed Claire's wit.

My supervisor was terrific at helping me separate my doubts about my own competence from the defensive posturing that Claire was obviously using to keep me at a distance. Faith was supremely skillful in helping me see the ways in which Claire's attacks were thinly disguised attempts to test my ability to hang in with her: tests of my ability to be trusted, fear of letting someone get too close, too much under the slick veneer, and her great desire for contact and intimacy. Faith was also helpful in defining ways I could respond more effectively and truly become more competent. Letting off steam in supervision sessions, as well as sharing my fears about whether I could do a good job, allowed me the latitude to be present and nondefensive with Claire.

Eventually Claire began to drop her edginess, and she became more forthcoming about having some big "secrets" that were of critical concern to her. You will find that many of your clients have these kinds of "secrets," usually aspects of themselves about which they are ashamed or embarrassed (Kelly, 1998). She talked at length of her concerns about my not liking her if and when she chose to divulge the secrets. I assured her that I had no investment in her doing anything and that I had great respect for her intellect and ability to choose whether or when to share more personal material.

The paradox was that by not being pressured to talk of more personal material, she began to talk of more personal material. This was a great lesson I learned early on. By not pushing her, by not buying into her jibes and challenges, by simply being solidly present (which is actually not "simple" at all), I helped Claire allow herself to let down her guard. Eventually, when the secret concerns about her sexual identity and some stories of past physical abuses were aired, it was almost anticlimactic. Then began the considerable work of allowing her the time and space to negotiate her way through her

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ideas and feelings about those past and present difficult people and situations, but that work was all done on the foundation of respect and trust that now existed between us.

In this process of helping clients become more trusting, and more forthcoming, lies the beauty of this work. Much of the process exists within the evolution of the relationship between client and counselor. The “beauty of the work” is what this book is about. Behind their fear of trusting us, most of our clients have an abiding desire to be known. Part of your job lies in creating the context in which your clients can allow themselves to be seen, to be known more fully.

### **Counseling and the Promotion of Personal Responsibility**

Just as the problems our clients bring to us can often be identified as some variation of fear, many of the best outcomes can be thought of as being our clients’ increased ability to manage life more responsibly. We all are free to choose our own courses of action and paths in life, and it is easy to appreciate the essential counseling role of helping people recognize their freedom and their right to choose based on that freedom. However, our role in helping people assume responsibility for the choices they make in their lives is sometimes less clear. The famous existential psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl (1963) once suggested that we should have a Statue of Responsibility to complement the Statue of Liberty as a way of demonstrating our collective commitment to enhancing personal responsibility.

The avoidance of personal responsibility can take many forms, and may not be particularly obvious. Sometimes even the most conventional, apparently functional people may be avoiding taking real responsibility for themselves. Many, perhaps most, of the clients with whom I’ve worked begin with some variation of the notion, “I don’t get enough \_\_\_\_.” You can fill in the blank. Typically, it is “recognition” or “respect” or some variant of “affection.” But the basic attitude is one of desire for the world to pay better attention to what the client wants and of blaming others when things do not go well. They have probably searched in all kinds of ways, often in all the wrong places, to find the love, the attention, or the recognition they are looking for, but have come up short. Sometimes they may have passed by another’s love that begged for *their* attention, available but unacknowledged, and missed it. This search for love and attention can also be incredibly destructive, sometimes getting people into big trouble, particularly if it’s expressed with minors or with violence. It is, nevertheless, important for the counselor to remember that it is the drive for love that fuels the fire.

Regardless of what clients want, successful counseling outcomes hinge on the development of more personal responsibility. It is about a shift from being a victim

“I don’t get enough”) to being an agent of action (“What can I do?”). It is a move away from blaming others to accepting responsibility for what one has and what one has to give. When a client has made the shift from “No one loves me” to “How may I be more loving?” the client has really grown. One of counseling’s finest functions is to help people, in this safe and controlled setting, experiment with trying to reach out in different and more constructive ways (Casey, 1996). It is your job to help this growth, to help your client give birth to a new sense of personal responsibility. In a sense, you are the midwife to this kind of emotional development.

### **The Relationship: Counseling’s Vital Ingredient**

The counselor–client therapeutic alliance, this connection between people, is key to ensuring a successful counseling outcome (Brodsky, 2011; Gelso, 2011). Some writers have suggested that the counselor’s theoretical approach, as well as the techniques offered up during the process of counseling, are secondary to the relationship itself (Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Orlinsky, Grawe, & Parks, 1994). While most experts in the fields of counseling and psychotherapy may disagree with such an extreme position, they generally do agree that it would be difficult to overstate the importance or central role of the counseling relationship between client and counselor (Gelso & Carter, 1985).

In what was a revolutionary position of his time, Carl Rogers (1951) suggested that if counselors, or therapists, could supply their clients with a steady stream of certain basic human ingredients, the clients would solve their own dilemmas and feel better. In his writings and lectures, Rogers named three ingredients that counselors give to successful therapeutic relationships: congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding. Other writers have maintained that while those ingredients might be necessary, they are probably of themselves insufficient to accomplish the broad goals and behavioral changes typically sought by our clients. Nevertheless, nearly all in the helping professions agree on the importance of those central factors to positive therapeutic outcomes. As a counselor, it is essential that you learn how to be personally genuine (congruence), to give your clients total acceptance without judgment (unconditional positive regard), and to develop a great capacity to see the world as they see it (empathic understanding). This is the nature of the empathic relationship. It is in this nurturing context that your other activities with clients will work best.

## **COUNSELING, PSYCHOTHERAPY, AND THE RANGE OF HELPING ROLES**

Many of the beginning students in graduate counseling programs like to refer to themselves as “therapists” in training. Why do they shy away from being called “counselor,” and prefer to be called “therapist”? This is a question my students and

I take up at the beginning of our introductory counseling skills course. We talk about differences between professional helping roles, between social workers, marriage and family therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, and the varieties of counselor roles in schools, mental health, and drug treatment settings. We talk about educational training requirements, credentialing, and licensure requirements. (If you have not yet had this discussion in your counselor or other human services training, you will. These are issues with which you will need to become familiar, particularly in regard to requirements in the state within which you live and plan to work.)

It appears that many of the distinctions between “counseling” and “psychotherapy” cited by my students have less to do with what actually happens in the work between client and professional and more to do with perceptions of power, prestige, and money. The counseling profession, springing from its earliest days of social activism and work with the disadvantaged in Boston (Bond, 2000), through the years of its work with veterans and its focus on vocational training (Sweeney, 2001), and into its further diversification to include broader issues of human growth and development (Gladstein & Apfel, 1987), has now emerged as a complex service field. The counselor must now respond to a range of complicated issues in a changing, diverse population. In its modern form, counseling has become a form of talking intervention that deals with a wide spectrum of personal growth issues as well as helping people deal with an array of pathological problems (Smith, 2001). It is continually broadening its scope to include previously underappreciated problems—as with addiction issues, for example—and it has in recent years become much more sensitive to the multicultural, diverse world in which we operate (Ivey, D’Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2002). As the newer professional “kid” on the block, the field of professional counseling has had to carve out its own identity and role definition. This business of making a separate, distinct identity has been difficult because of the significant overlap and similarity between counseling and other related psychotherapy activities. The public may not distinguish between these kinds of activities, and even many professional texts make little, if any, distinction.

Some basic assumptions may differentiate psychotherapy activity from counseling activity, however. Central to the therapy model is the widely held belief that the “therapist” is in a helping role designed to “treat” some aspect of the “patient” that needs readjustment. The therapist is the technical expert, the patient one who needs treatment. This is very much a psychological adaptation of the old doctor-patient medical model, a hand-me-down from the medical psychiatric tradition.

The counseling model is more generally egalitarian. The counselor is viewed as a client’s fellow traveler on the road of life, not that different or removed from the person who has come for help (Yalom, 2002). In this model the helper may be a bit farther along the road, but is a traveler nonetheless, and is one who also experiences

many of the same problems in living. Clients are not so much to be treated as understood and assisted in finding their own solutions to those life problems. This is particularly true for school counselors or others who work with essentially “well” populations.

In practice, certainly, the distinctions blur. Counselors find themselves working with difficult, seriously disturbed people, and psychotherapists often explore those shared life problems with great humility and a sense of social awareness. Social workers in clinical practice, for example, may operate with little visible distinction in the ways they work from clinical mental health counselors working in the community. Addictions counselors work with people with mental health issues, and mental health counselors work with people with addictions issues.

One can have a difficult time, when looking from the outside, differentiating between these varieties of “psychotherapy” activity and “counseling” activity, except in how the professionals define it.

Each professional identity has its own means of ensuring a level of quality service provision. Psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family therapists have standards set by licensing boards. Professional counselor licensing, coupled with mandated insurance reimbursement for counseling services (in nearly all states), has helped to make the counseling profession a publicly recognized, legitimate healing activity. If licensed (typically achieved by having obtained a master’s degree in counseling plus meeting supervised practice and examination requirements), the community or agency counselor is usually able to access insurance reimbursement for services. School counselors, with their own licensing procedures, are certainly visible and prominent service providers in schools. These licensures, coupled with public acceptance of the profession, have helped to ensure that a baseline of quality care will be provided.

## THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF COUNSELING

Learning to be a counselor involves building a repertoire of assessment, responding, and helping skills. It involves, in other words, developing tools to help you help your client repair the mental and emotional “house” in which she lives. But it is much more than that. It is the development of wisdom; it is about learning how to connect effectively with people. It requires that you learn about yourself in the midst of assisting others (Guindon, 2011; Reinkraut, Motulsky, & Ritchie, 2009). It is both science and art. You should find particular joy in a profession where learning about yourself is prerequisite to learning how to do the work with others. What other professions can make such a claim? Moreover, learning to do this work has the tremendous potential for reaching into the other realms of our lives and enriching them. There is distinct potential for improving the general quality of

your relationships with others, particularly your most intimate relationships, as a side benefit of becoming an effective counselor. Again, what other profession can offer such rewards?

This work is not without its difficulties and challenges, however. It can be emotionally draining and difficult, particularly when you deal every day with people who move from one crisis situation to another. It can at times be difficult to not take your clients' problems home with you.

I oftentimes suggest to my graduate counseling students that they interview counselors working in the field, either as part of a formally assigned experience or more informally for their own education. They sit down and talk with counselors working in schools, mental health agencies, and drug clinics and ask them about their joys and frustrations with the work. They come back with interesting reports of these interviews. Invariably, the graduate students talk of the delight many of these counselors take in watching their students, or their clients, grow and experience their lives. They talk of how these counselors themselves report that they grow and learn from their interactions with their clients. My students are inspired by these stories. It is confirmation of their own initial desires to enter the field.

But there are also the stories of overwhelming caseloads, of a parade of difficult clients, of unresponsive agency administrators, and of unending paperwork. Some school counselors talk of dramatically difficult student behavioral and emotional problems coupled with diminishing community support. Sometimes my students interview counselors who seem deadened by their work, not particularly fond of their clients or their colleagues, and ready to work elsewhere but unwilling to go out and look for another job. A general lassitude, lack of energy, almost a depression surrounds these counselors—and students cannot help but wonder about the toll counseling takes on those who work in this field. They correctly wonder about the degree of help these counselors can afford their clients and speculate about the motivations that will continue to keep them at work in a field where adequate interpersonal payback has ceased. Words like “burnout” come into play in these discussions.

Ongoing counselor self-understanding and personal examination is more than a casual, self-indulgent preoccupation with self, or ego gratification. It is an ethical, professional obligation that you manage your relationship matrix variables, your own history, and your current emotional life so that full attention can be paid to your client's relationship variables, history, and emotional life. You are also obliged to come to grips with counseling work itself should it ever become stale and unrewarding, for whatever reason, so that you can either quit and move on to something else or find ways to become revitalized and enthusiastic.

For myself, I cannot thank this profession enough for giving me the tools and wherewithal to deal more effectively with my own family, friends, and other close relationships. I am not the perfect listener, and still have lapses in how closely

I attend to friends and family, but I do at least know the difference between good and poor listening, the importance of solid emotional contact, and the need for give and take in a relationship. It is my fervent hope that this work benefits you in a similar fashion. I am convinced it has that potential. As much as this work is about helping others, it is also about helping yourself. You will become involved in reciprocal learning relationships with your clients, and they may teach you significant things about life.

There is even more about this work that is compellingly important, however, and these aspects have global implications. If we are concerned about the fate of the world, about the enormous problems that confront the planet, what better arena in which to work than that which emphasizes improved interpersonal communication (Davis, 1996)? If we think of our own work as having the possible rippling effect of sending our clients, our students, and our colleagues out into the world with a greater appreciation of good communication and solid relationship skills, a greater sense of our shared humanity, we could consider ourselves pioneers for global connection. Toward the end of his life, the renowned psychologist Carl Rogers dedicated himself to the application of his principles of empathic, nondirective communication skills to international peace conferencing. There is no reason those of us who follow him should confine our own work to a smaller scale.

## **BUILDING MULTICULTURAL AND ETHICAL COMPETENCE**

As you embark on the process of learning more about yourself and your motivations to be a counselor, as well as about the skills necessary to do this work, you will want to simultaneously heighten your appreciation of the multicultural, diverse nature of the world in which you work. It is part of your obligation to make sure that you work in ways that ethically protect the safety of both your clients and yourself. Chapter 6 is devoted solely to these issues of becoming an ethically adept and multiculturally aware counselor, but it is appropriate to reiterate the importance of ethical and multicultural awareness here as well. An awareness of issues related to dealing with people who might be different from you, and of the ethical principles that guide our profession, are as critical to doing solid counseling work as are self-understanding and a repertoire of skills. You want your clients to leave you feeling and doing better than when they started—or at the very least no worse. Your attention to the ethics of good practice, as well as to the worldview people bring to counseling, helps to ensure that no harm will be done.

Some of the basic assumptions held most sacred by European-American theories about effective counseling fly directly in the face of many non-Western cultural traditions. Some of these assumptions are firmly entrenched in the Western cultural ways of thinking about people, and entrenched as well within the thinking

of counselors who have been raised in that tradition. Such assumptions, if unchallenged by the unaware counselor, may result in an inability to connect with clients who have different worldviews. One obvious example of this kind of thinking has to do with the emphasis on the inherent value of the individual in most traditional counseling theories. A counselor who is grounded in such individualistic assumptions about people will have a hard time understanding the collectivist, more community-mindedness of non-Western clients (Greenfield, 1994; Schneider, Karcher, & Schlapkohl, 1999). Even worse, the counselor grounded in Western cultural values may ignore—or even help to perpetuate—some of the real abuses of power and oppression that some clients endure due to the political forces at play in the world that those clients inhabit (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000).

Adopting a multicultural worldview and learning about ideas related to counseling from such a multicultural perspective are essential for those who want to be effective counselors. You live in a rapidly changing, incredibly diverse world, and you will encounter clients who have experiences and perspectives that are very different from yours. Rather than seeing these differences as a block to understanding, you can embrace such differences as a great opportunity to stretch your own thinking. This is yet another opportunity to learn more about yourself in relation to others, to learn from the clients you serve.

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## THE EFFECTIVE COUNSELOR

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Skills  
Practice  
Manual  
Session I

The man who would learn the human mind will gain almost nothing from experimental psychology. Far better for him to put away his academic gown, to say good-bye to the study, and to wander with human heart through the world. There, in the horrors of the prison, the asylum, and the hospital, in the drinking-shops, brothels, and gambling hells, in the salons of the elegant, in the exchanges, socialist meetings, churches, religious revivals, and sectarian ecstasies, through love and hate, through the experience of passion in every form of his own body, he would reap richer store of knowledge than textbooks a foot thick could give him. Then he would know how to doctor the sick with real knowledge of the human soul. (Jung, 1961, 71)

Nobody said learning to become a counselor is easy. It is a rare profession indeed that requires academic preparation and training and also demands that you expand and examine yourself personally. Not only must you become an adept practitioner of a trade, you must also become wise in the ways of the world. You don't need to take Jung's advice literally because academic and intellectual training are critically important in learning to do counseling work, but his words remind us that we must attend to other responsibilities as well.

Who you are as a person will largely determine how effective you will be in working with others as a counselor. You are, in your individual person, your own single best tool for helping others. Your values, beliefs, and personal background—simply how you live your daily life—will influence the lives of your clients. All of your history, your personal conduct, and your attitudes about people and the world around you are at play in the counseling relationship. The degree to which you understand yourself will have a lot to do with how effective you will be with your clients (Kottler, 1993).

### The Importance of Counselor Self-Awareness

Because self-awareness has such a major impact on a counselor's effectiveness, many programs in counseling, clinical psychology, and even social work require implicitly or explicitly that students engage in some kind of personal counseling or growth work as part of their training. Counselor self-awareness is also a primary ethical consideration because it ensures that we will, at the very least, do no harm to our clients by unconsciously working out our own emotional unfinished business through them. Counselors do not have to be perfect people, but the more we understand and have come to grips with our personal history, the less we will be controlled by that past or look to others to satisfy its deficits.

A counselor's unmet intimacy needs or desire to prove competency may actively interfere with delivering the best services possible. The effective counselor has learned how to use his particular personal difficulties as a way of relating to the specific emotional needs of his clients (Foster, 1996). Truly sound, effective, and ethical practice involves learning all you can about people and how they behave, as well as about yourself. Certainly, the degree of self-awareness that you are able to achieve is at least as important as the formal training you receive (Cavanagh, 1990). Self-awareness is a critical factor in developing the all-important empathy necessary for doing good counseling work (Brennan, 1987; Dixon, 1980), and learning about yourself is probably the best way to begin to learn about the development of empathy for others (Duan, Rose, & Kraatz, 2002). While the connection between your personal history and your counseling effectiveness is not directly clear, there is nevertheless a good case to be made for looking at your own background (Barta, 1999; Clemente-Crain, 1996; Softas-Nall, Baldo, & Williams, 2001). The best counselors are those who learn how to blend their formal knowledge and understanding of human relationships with a solid understanding of their own personal history (Cormier & Cormier, 1998).

### Empathizing With Client Vulnerability

The requirement for counselor personal growth and self-examination may also provide a good firsthand introduction to how vulnerable it can feel to be a client.

For anyone who has never experienced the joys, or the terrors, of being a client, it is an excellent empathy-enhancing experience. What better way to begin to understand how it feels to be a client than to sit in that other chair? It is a truism that seeking counseling is a courageous act. Seeking help or asking for assistance puts one in a position of vulnerability. The act can be doubly courageous for those who see asking for help as some kind of personal weakness (Shapiro, 1984). Many people who come to see you may have tried other ways of solving their problems, including using family, friends, and their own internal resources. This may be particularly true for people from some cultural backgrounds where seeking help outside the family is not valued and may be frowned upon (Pedersen & Ivey, 1993).

Ethical principles for counseling practice dictate closely guarded boundaries for the counselor–client relationship, proscribing interactions beyond those that occur within the actual time of professional contact. Protection of the vulnerable client from the more powerful counselor is a cornerstone of professional codes of conduct, which acknowledge that the counselor–client relationship has tremendous potential for harm as well as for help.

### **The Counselor–Client Relationship Matrix**

The counselor–client relationship is further complicated by the vast array of past and present variables at play between the counselor and client, or what can be called the counselor–client relationship matrix. This matrix, or web, is a mix of both the counselor’s and the client’s present experience, ideas, thoughts and feelings, values, unique cultural background, and past experiences. Figure 1.2 illustrates this matrix. All of this material, these cumulative experiences and thoughts and feelings, swirl around and through these two people in an intricate dance when they meet together. It is this dance that makes for the excitement and drama of the unfolding counseling relationship, and it holds great potential for assisting client growth—if managed well.

To explain how this matrix of relationship variables will affect your work, consider this scenario. Teresa, a counselor-in-training, was raised by a perfectionistic, controlling mother and an emotionally distant and unavailable father. She emerged from childhood and adolescence into adulthood with a high degree of academic accomplishment and success but with unmet yearnings for closeness with others. Her attempts at forming close relationships have been hampered by her neediness and tendency to become too quickly dependent. Teresa believes that becoming a counselor will be a safe way for her to pursue intimacy with others without all of the risks attendant to the give and take of friendships and relationships with lovers.

In her work with clients, Teresa will interact with many people who also have had difficulties establishing sound interpersonal relationships, each of them carrying into counseling their histories of relationship, particularly their earliest ones with

**Figure 1.2** The Counselor–Client Matrix

Ongoing thoughts and feelings		Ongoing thoughts and feelings
COUNSELOR	Immediate experience of the other	CLIENT
Personal history, relationships, and experiences		Personal history, relationships, and experiences

their families. Because of her own history, Teresa will have difficulty connecting with the pain her clients relate, and unless she comes to grips with some of her own issues, she runs the risk of becoming unhealthily enmeshed with her clients. Her desire for closeness may intersect with her clients' desires for closeness in ways that are distinctly not helpful, and may even be harmful. She may promote dependency, or serve to isolate her clients even further from the development of solid relationships with others because of her desire for them to see her as special. Her unacknowledged past could thus have a variety of harmful consequences for those who have sought her help. Without an awareness of her own neediness, what some have called her own “woundedness” (May, Remen, Young, & Berland, 1985), Teresa may harm more than help.

### Self-Awareness and the Role of Unconscious Material

Beyond developing a high level of self-understanding, you should seek to understand your motivations for doing this kind of work and your hidden desires for what you plan to gain from it. If you are to learn both *what* you want and *why* you want it, you will need to bring as much personal material into your conscious awareness as possible. Plumbing your own depths will undoubtedly increase your appreciation for how much material is unconscious, or out of awareness, in all of us.

Sigmund Freud introduced the notion of the unconscious as a way of talking about material that exists in our minds, for each of us, out of our day-to-day awareness. He believed that all of the thoughts and feelings that exist in the unconscious are there because they are too painful to be remembered, that they have been “repressed” and pushed out of conscious awareness. He believed that these thoughts and feelings are related to early childhood psychosexual developmental issues and our fantasized notions of sexuality and power struggles with parents.

Many of Freud's original ideas have been challenged by other theorists both in and out of psychoanalytic schools of thought; however, the idea of the unconscious

is broadly accepted by most major approaches to counseling and psychotherapy. Theorists may disagree about the specific nature and origins of material held in the unconscious, but they generally believe that we all function with elements of our past stored in our memories just beyond the grasp of our daily awareness. A function of most counseling is to help people access more of this material, to draw it into the realm of conscious awareness. This business of harvesting unconscious material is complicated. Your course work and clinical experiences will serve as an introduction to the reality and importance of this phenomenon, and a life's work in counseling will help you appreciate its complexity.

It is important for counselors to begin to recognize how their own unconscious material affects their work. To the degree that it is not understood, it can unwittingly influence the course of work with clients. There is, for example, a tendency for counselors to project their own unconscious material onto their clients (Hackney & Cormier, 2001). Counselors who have unresolved, unconscious needs for intimacy, power, or control can subtly work those needs out through work with their clients. This is why supervision is seen as a critical ethical responsibility for sound counseling practice.

A supervision story illustrates why this awareness of our own “unfinished business” is critical. A number of years ago I supervised a counselor named “Lisa.” Lisa had been doing a lot of couples and family counseling. During one of our supervision sessions she commented on the number of people whom she'd seen who were getting divorced. We joked that maybe “something was in the water” or that some kind of divorce bug was going around. However, when Lisa began to look more seriously at the issue and this “coincidence,” she could not escape the conclusion that perhaps she was acting with her clients in some ways—probably unconsciously—that encouraged separation and divorce. This inevitably led her to look at the subtle ways she had been encouraging this action in her communications with her clients, to consider her own motivations in such encouragement, and finally to examine her thoughts and feelings about her own marriage. Lisa's courage, her ability to truly take responsibility for her own material that had been seeping into the work with her clients, enabled her to step back and rethink her interventions with them.

This stepping back and taking responsibility for your own material allows for a clean working relationship with your clients. As an effective counselor, you will do what you can to leave the relationship, and the work your client needs to do, uncontaminated by your own unfinished, unexamined issues (Hayes, 2002). You will become as healthy and as uncontaminated by your past as possible and will recognize those areas where work remains to be done.

## The Counselor's Professional Preparation

Life experience helps to shape the person of the counselor. The wider and more divergent the life experience, the greater the capacity of the counselor to do this work. Counseling is both science, represented by your professional course work and preparation, and art, represented by your personal evolution. In addition to developing your counseling skills, you need to develop your knowledge of contemporary thought about the forces that have shaped your clients' lives and the signs of normal and abnormal development. You need to have a working knowledge of basic diagnostic and assessment strategies, differential treatment approaches, and the ramifications of ethical and legal dilemmas you will confront in your work. All of this material is covered in the course work of most graduate counseling programs.

The course work recommended by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) encompasses a body of knowledge that professional counselors must acquire as a minimal foundation for doing this work. The CACREP standards for counseling competence dictate completion of a formal program of graduate study that includes course work and demonstrated competence in eight core areas, supervised clinical experiences, and supervised internships. CACREP also upholds standards for the number of graduate credit hours (ranging from 48 to 60), number of faculty in training programs, and the supervision of internships. CACREP-accredited programs must follow these standards (CACREP, 2001). Most of the programs that have chosen not to pursue CACREP accreditation still adhere, by and large, to the CACREP standards. This course work, as well as standards adopted by various licensing boards in the counseling field, provides some assurance of counselor competence.

Become familiar with the certification and licensure regulations regarding the practice of counseling—or the requirements for licensure in another related program you may be pursuing (e.g., social work, marriage and family therapy)—in the geographic area where you will work. Make sure that the academic training you pursue will prepare you for this licensure. Being professionally credentialed will give you visibility and will offer some assurance to the public of your competence. Some counseling jobs require licensure, and each counseling specialization (clinical mental health counseling, school counseling, and so forth) has its own licensure requirements. Credentialing may also afford you access to insurance reimbursement that would be inaccessible otherwise. Familiarize yourself with the legal requirements of the credentialing process that accompanies the kinds of counseling you wish to do (Anderson & Swanson, 1994).

Effective counseling involves both the science of the skills and the art of knowing how and when to use those skills (Wilcox-Mathew, Ottens, & Minor, 1997). Your journey in this profession necessarily involves both a drive toward personal wholeness and an accumulation of skills and knowledge about people and the best practices of counseling.

## Characteristics of Effective Counselors

What is a healthy, or whole, counselor? What are those naturally occurring traits and features of personal awareness that contribute to wholeness and health and that result in effective counseling outcomes? There have been many attempts to isolate the specific characteristics of effective counselors, in no small part so that counselor education programs can become more adept at selecting candidates for training. The thinking here is that if we can select people who already have inherent personality characteristics that are suitable for this work, then training programs can focus on specific skills training to supplement those natural inclinations.

Many of these “laundry lists” of characteristics look like something out of the Girl or Boy Scouts Manual, using words like “trustworthy” and “loyal,” and are not especially helpful in making discriminating decisions about whom to select for counselor training. Researchers have uncovered evidence that certain factors do tend to contribute to better work in this field. For example, counselors who are more personally confident and socially adept (Williams, 1999) will have an easier time relating to their clients. The following ten favorable personality characteristics are also the least teachable to those who do not already possess them (Pope, 1996; Scheffler, 1984):

- Acceptance
- Empathy
- Emotional stability
- Flexibility
- Open-mindedness
- Interest in people
- Genuineness
- Confidence
- Sensitivity
- Fairness

Other lists of characteristics retain this range of personal characteristics and add specific qualities suggesting wisdom and maturity such as inner directedness, existentiality, feeling reactivity, spontaneity, self-regard, and capacity for intimate contact (Ritter, 1984), and spirituality and self-actualization.

## The Counselor as a “Whole Person”

Counseling can be draining and difficult work, particularly when one’s caseload is comprised largely of people who are consistently in serious difficulty. Chapter 11 considers some ways in which counselors can maintain themselves and stay fresh; this section examines the basis for wellness.

Wegscheider (1981) proposed looking at the counselor’s state of wellness from the perspective of “wholeness.” In this model different aspects, or “selves,” comprise the whole counselor, each of which needs care and attention. I have found this model, with my own modification, to be extremely helpful, not only for thinking about counselor health but also as a way of considering client assessment. These “selves” of ours are comprised of the following elements:

- Physical self
- Emotional self
- Social and familial self
- Intellectual self
- Working self
- Aesthetic self
- Spiritual self

It should be readily apparent that counselors who wish to do good work with people need to function at relatively high levels in each of these areas. Effective counselors acknowledge that a balanced personal life is central to doing good counseling work (Reyak-Schelar & Feldman, 1984). A life that overemphasizes one or two of these areas, to the exclusion of others, is a life that runs a bit off balance and compromises the capacity to respond to those needs in others.

I once had the good fortune to take part in a workshop conducted by the noted existentialist Jim Bugental, who led participants in an unsettling, interesting experiment in which we explored that almost universally shared sense of yearning, a longing for some vague “more.” We were divided into groups of three, and each of us was to alternately ask another person in the triad variations of only one question: “What is it that you really want?” We had 10 minutes to explore this question and, after the person answered, to ask it again using our own words but without varying from that central theme.

This may seem innocuous enough, contemplating what is “wanted,” but my group of three found it difficult. Each time the question was asked and answered, we plunged more deeply into the truer, more basic elements of our desires. It was like peeling away the layers of an onion, each variant of the question, “So what is it you *really* want?” pushing us to go deeper into our essential wants. There was also a lot of pain associated with diving into these questions of yearning.

In the exercise that followed, we explored these questions: “How do you stop yourself from getting what you want?” and “What would you like to do to start acting on your own behalf?” Each of us, in turn, grappled with the complexities that such simple questions belie. Each of us had to think of the inhibiting factors, the personal histories and current realities of our lives, that had blocked us from reaching for our dreams. For all of us in that little group, the clash between the call of daily duties and responsibilities and the inner rumblings of yearning soon became apparent. Those simple questions quickly called our most complex conflicts into the room. These are, of course, essential questions for us all: “What is it in life that you really want . . . and how do you plan to go after it?”

### REFLECTION EXERCISE 1.2: The Balance in Your Life

As you contemplate becoming a professional counselor, periodically check in with yourself to make sure that you are certain about the work you want to do. This exercise is designed to help you consider this, and it can be repeated from time to time during your period of professional preparation. Take a few moments for some private, silent reflection. Contemplate your life, and ask yourself some focused questions about the state of who you are and where you are headed. You may have your own questions, or you may want to use these to stimulate your thinking:

- Am I happy with the professional path I have chosen, and do I feel like I'm going in the right direction?
- What are my unique talents and gifts, and have I found a way to bring those out into the world?
- As I survey my own personal “selves,” is my life lived in balance? What could I do to make it more balanced?
- If I found out I had six months to live, what would I do with that time? Should I be doing some of those things now anyway?
- Is my chosen career path toward becoming a professional counselor congruent with what I see as my life tasks, and do I think this work will truly fulfill me?

There are no “right” answers to these questions. What works for one of us might not be right for another. You won't be able to fully answer some of the questions until you've tried certain things out. You won't know, for example, how fulfilling any work path is until you have traveled it for a while, but you may now have some intuitive glimpses of the correct fit of a certain kind of work and who you are as a person.

Finally, like all people, counselors change over time, so it is important that we ask ourselves these central questions periodically, throughout our careers, as a check on our own integrity and sense of purpose.

## A Counselor's Levels of Awareness

You function on multiple levels of awareness regarding your thoughts and feelings, and your facility at managing and moving among those fluid levels is key to your success in work as a counselor. Figure 1.3 shows a three-tiered model you may use to think about these multiple levels of awareness.

In this model the foundation of counselor awareness is the *intrapersonal* level of awareness. It is how you are feeling and what you are thinking, and it is determined by the cumulative sum of your emotional and cognitive experience as it is acted upon by the current situation in which you find yourself. Descartes made famous the remark, “I think, therefore I am.” You could also say, “I feel, therefore I am.” Or, perhaps, “I think *and* feel, therefore I am.” Some would argue that what we think determines what we feel. In any case, no one would deny that emotions are a large part of our total being or that caring for our emotional selves is a critical aspect of counselor self-care (Wilson, 1994). To be an effective counselor, you will need to regularly check in with yourself at this level, to look at your internal experience and reflect on what you are feeling and thinking.

At the second level is *interpersonal* awareness. This relates to the dynamics of your interactions with other individuals. It is about intimacy, contact, and conflict—all the relationship variables at play between you and one other person. Interpersonal awareness means that as you interact with a client, part of your mind is simultaneously standing back, looking on, and reflecting on the quality of the interaction. We shall talk in some depth about these important skills in later chapters. For now suffice it to say that throughout your practice as a counselor you will need to regularly check your awareness at both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels.

**Figure 1.3** Levels of Counselor Awareness

<p><b>Level III</b></p> <p>Collective Awareness</p> <p>(Awareness of the group dynamic)</p>
<p><b>Level II</b></p> <p>Interpersonal Awareness</p> <p>(Awareness of relationship with another)</p>
<p><b>Level I</b></p> <p>Intrapersonal Awareness</p> <p>(Awareness of internal thoughts and feelings)</p>

Finally, there is the group or collective dimension of awareness. At this level, which is of particular relevance to those who do group counseling work, a complex set of dynamics and feelings fly between the members and leaders of a group. These dynamics are at play in all groups, not only counseling groups. These are the overt and covert emotional messages that exist among group members, the web of feeling and thought that makes for tremendous energy and excitement in much of group work.

It is, however, the first two dimensions that are of primary concern to us here. Your ability to keep a close eye on your shifting internal state (your intrapersonal awareness) coupled with your ability to monitor the feelings and dynamics of the relationship (your interpersonal awareness) are together fundamental to your ability to develop skill as a counselor.

### **REFLECTION EXERCISE 1.3: Paying Attention to Your Internal World**

This is a brief exercise. You can complete it in 5 minutes or less. Close your eyes and let your attention move inward. Take note of the ideas and feelings passing through you. Pay particular attention to your feeling state; note it without judgment and without trying to attach it to any particular ideas or series of events. Open your eyes, bringing your awareness back into your current environment.

Repeat this each day, perhaps five to ten times a day, in various situations. With practice you will become much more adept at monitoring your ongoing feeling state and eventually linking that to the events and circumstances around you.

After a few days of repeating the exercise when alone, try doing this internal “check in” while with other people. While in conversation with someone, tune in to your internal thinking and feeling state. Make a conscious effort to note the feelings and thoughts that move within you. Think about which of those are related to this person with whom you are speaking and which seem extraneous. With practice you will be able to check in unobtrusively in any situation without closing your eyes or appearing to isolate yourself. Nurturing the ability to easily check in with your own internal world is invaluable for effective counseling.

## **A Counselor’s Values, Beliefs, and Attitudes**

In addition to your personality, your family and personal background, and your training, an important part of what makes up your “person” as a counselor is your worldview—what you believe to be true about people and the world. Your ideals and your fundamental beliefs about how things do and should work will

intimately and profoundly affect your work with people. As a generation's poet laureate has said in song,

Might like to wear cotton / Might like to wear silk  
Might like to drink whisky / Might like to drink milk  
Might like to eat caviar / Might like to eat bread  
You might be sleepin' on a floor / Or sleepin' in a king sized bed  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody  
Yes indeed / You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the Devil, or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody. (Dylan, 1979)

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*Source:* Dylan, Bob, *Gotta Serve Somebody*, Special Rider Records, Columbia, 1979. Used by permission.

We all believe in something, and we serve those beliefs in all that we do. But in what do you believe? Do you believe in God, in many gods, in no god? Do you believe in the concept of Original Sin, or No Thing, or nothing? Are neuroses and psychoses the result of chemical imbalance, the result of conditioned responses to negative events, the product of inevitable psychosexual conflicts, profound philosophical statements about the human condition, or simply modern ways of saying our "sins"? The question here is not "What have your training and education taught you?" but "What do *you* believe?"

At some point each of us needs to take a stand, to articulate our beliefs about the world. If your beliefs are shifting and uncertain, then that uncertainty becomes your stance. A refusal to take any position becomes your position. A belief in no beliefs is a belief of sorts. Your core beliefs and assumptions form the bedrock on which you will develop theories of working with people. You need to take the time, not just once but repeatedly, to check in with yourself and examine your system of values. This, too, is part of your ethical responsibility to the people you serve.

There has been controversy in the counseling field regarding a counselor's use of values in work with clients. Some approaches to counseling advocate the counselor acting as value free as possible (Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1978); others contend that counselors should actively use their own values in their work (Lickona, 1991) and plan for the utilization of values as a core part of the counseling process (Vachon & Agresti, 1992). Most agree that, one way or another, personal counselor values *do* influence work with clients, and they advocate clarity about what those values are (Patterson, 1989; Peterson, 1976; Rosik, 2003; Strupp, 1974).

Kinnier, Kernes, and Dautheribes (2000, p. 9) provide a "short list of universal moral values" that they maintain should serve as a guide for counseling work. Like

the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”), these values were designed to cut across all major religions and sectarian belief systems and to be relevant in any cultural context. Their list is as follows:

- Commit to something greater than oneself.
- Seek the Truth (or truths).
- Seek justice.
- Practice self-respect, but with humility, self-discipline, and acceptance of personal responsibility.
- Respect and care for oneself.
- Do not exalt oneself or overindulge; show humility and avoid gluttony, greed, or other forms of selfishness or self-centeredness.
- Act in accordance with one’s conscience and accept responsibility for one’s behavior.
- Show respect and caring for others (the Golden Rule).
- Recognize the connectedness between all people.
- Serve humankind and be helpful to individuals.
- Be caring, respectful, compassionate, tolerant, and forgiving of others.
- Do not hurt others (e.g., do not murder, abuse, steal from, cheat, or lie to others).
- Care for living things and the environment.

In my own counseling work, I have synthesized this list to create my own set of core values, which underlie my assumptions about people and deeply affect how I work with them. I would not expect my own list to be universally accepted, but I strongly recommend that each of you develop your own set of core values. Use the values presented here as a jumping off point to define your own core values, and do your counseling work with awareness of these values. Here are my five core values.

1. *A person’s essential nature is pure and good.*

If you adopt this value as your own, you will operate from the belief that every individual was born with innate talents and gifts and that these have either been nurtured and supported or criticized and quashed. You will understand that much of the maladaptive behavior of children, adolescents, and adults is the result of learning in response to harmful environmental influences. Oftentimes negative behavior has been learned as a survival strategy in life-threatening situations. Your job as a counselor is to see the beauty of the person behind what has been learned and not be unduly put off by the negative behaviors.

**REFLECTION EXERCISE 1.4: Personal Counseling Challenges**

Consider the following, individually and then in small groups. Are there people with whom you think it will be very difficult or impossible for you to work? Who are these people, and what is it about them that will make helping them in counseling so difficult? Perhaps more important, what is it about *you* that would make working with such people difficult? Do you see any possibility for reconciling these ideas and feelings in a way that will make counseling these kinds of clients possible for you?

2. *My primary role as a counselor is to support my clients' capacity to manage freedom and responsibility and to help them see the ways in which they influence and are influenced by greater social forces.*

Adopting this value means that one of your primary counseling functions will be to help people recognize their capacity to make changes in their lives (Olsen, 2005), and also to see and become aware of all the influences on their lives: psychological, sociological, and political (Odegard & Vereen, 2010). Too often the temptation for counselors is to think only of the psychological, to neglect the obvious impact of sociocultural forces that influence us all. Similarly, it should go without saying that your primary responsibility is to the individual you serve, not to external agents (including spouses and families) or to the state.

A longtime friend Jim Loewen (1995) has written extensively about race and history in this country. In a lecture at my college a few years ago, he asked for a show of hands of how many thought that their lives were shaped by forces beyond their control. About five hands in the audience of more than a hundred largely white, middle-class, young adult Vermonters went up. Jim went on to say that the proportion of hand-raising in a lecture he'd recently done at a predominantly black school in Mississippi was reversed—that in an audience of the same number, about 95 percent of the hands went up in answer to the same question. He maintains that people of color are far more intimately knowledgeable than are white people of the ways in which our lives are controlled by external political forces. Because of overt and covert racially motivated actions directed against them (e.g., police practices of racial profiling), people of color have no choice but to become knowledgeable about the people and agencies who do these things. Whites, he maintains, are also strongly influenced by outside forces, but because the effect is not directly visible in their everyday lives, they tend to personalize or “psychologize” it. A white factory worker forced into early retirement, for example, is likely to view his job loss as a

personal failure rather than in political terms (e.g., as a tactic used by many U.S. employers today to lower the average wage of the workforce).

Hillman and Ventura (1992) suggest that a studied ignorance of these larger forces by our profession has resulted in an entire generation of politically naïve and impotent counselors and therapists who are unable to mobilize energy sufficient to address compelling social issues. There are those who advocate that counselors and therapists become more politically active (Fox, 2003). Counselors should, at the least, become aware of their own tendencies to operate in unconsciously discriminating ways (Ridley, 1995) and recognize the ways in which their counseling may support the oppression of clients (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000).

A number of years ago I met for a single session with a woman who was distressed because her husband, complaining of depression and needing time alone, had left her. My distinct impression at the time was that he quite possibly could have been striking out for freedom, taking a stand on his own behalf, perhaps even in reaction to her desire to keep him firmly entrenched at home. I vaguely remember talking with her about taking his absence as an opportunity to learn more about herself, but I recall making no suggestions about ways to reel him back in.

She came back for one more session a few months later, mostly to thank me for my wonderful advice. My advice? What could be wonderful, I thought, about whatever nonadvice I'd given her? She thanked me profusely for helping to get her husband back. He was now on some terrific medications and was not talking about leaving any more. I was speechless. How had I played into this business of "getting him back"? What had I said? I still have no clue, and I am still distressed about the possibilities that I unwittingly assisted a process of coercing this man, a stranger to me, back into an environment that he may have found personally stifling.

Adopting this value means that you will have no interest in aiding your clients' attempts to control others. Furthermore, you will remain alert to the dangers of allowing your own counseling efforts to become a vehicle of control. Some awful abuses of power occur under the name of protecting people from themselves, or society from them. You need to be extraordinarily careful, in all counseling work situations, that you serve your client's best interests, meaning the pursuit of personal freedom and responsibility, not the interests of others. This is very difficult because sometimes people are truly out of control and need to be protected from themselves for a time until they can legitimately make good decisions for themselves.

*3. The fundamental driving forces that compel me to do this work are love and compassion.*

If you adopt this value, you will want to develop your ability to see connections between yourself and other people, among all people, and indeed, among all living things. This relatedness, this sense of connection, will allow you to conduct yourself

with your clients in a way that is truly caring. In this, you will bring all of your own humanity to your work (Nelson-Jones, 2004).

Think about a person you care deeply about, your child, for example, or your sister. When working with a “difficult” client, ask yourself this question: “How would I be approaching this person if she were my sister?” Obviously, there are many reasons to refrain from counseling your actual children or relatives (it would violate rules of both ethics and common sense), yet what a transformation it could make in your work if you were to treat all of your clients with this “as if” mentality. Your work would automatically be less about “treating” someone or some piece of behavior and more about “caring for” this client’s well-being.

I recently attended an event honoring the “pioneers” of the hospice movement. One of the honorees at this event, Florence Wald, who helped found the first residential hospice program in America, suggested that it would be a good idea for all new medical students to spend six weeks doing service work in a hospice program before starting their medical training. What a concept! What an intriguing idea for anyone entering the helping professions—to sit with people where the only possible way of being with them is to be immediately present, without expectations of action or rehabilitation.

When you approach your work with love and compassion, you begin to see how people’s lives are so often controlled by fear. So many human problems are the result of decisions or automatic reactions based on fear. When you can learn to deal with your own fears in a way that allows you to operate in a more empathic and loving fashion, this cannot but help your clients to act similarly.

4. *My rewards in this work are primarily intrinsic, as opposed to extrinsic.*

If you adopt this value, it means that you will be less interested in the external rewards that your work with people might yield, such as fees or professional status, and more interested in the less tangible satisfactions of the work, such as affection, connection, and personal learning. The noted analyst Erich Fromm (1989) called this a “being” orientation, as opposed to the “having” orientation, which is the more supported orientation in our culture today. Fromm and others (Wachtel, 1984) maintain that our culture, which is essentially capitalistic and materialistic, encourages the pursuit of money and things by playing on people’s personal anxiety and sense of personal emptiness. They see people’s attempts to accumulate material possessions, the “having” life, as a futile attempt to fill an internal void, a sense of personal emptiness. Far better, they suggest, to build a life around connections with people and attempts to promote personal self-awareness. This being orientation is not only far more personally rewarding and fulfilling, but it also serves a much better modeling function for our clients. Needless to say, adopting this value does not imply a vow of poverty or that we should not expect to make a decent living wage doing this work.

5. *I approach life with an attitude of gratitude and forgiveness.*

The fact of being alive is wondrous, each day a gift. You may choose the attitude you bring to this life and your work. Given this capacity to choose, why not embrace the positive? If you adopt this value, you will be making a conscious choice to always look at the brighter side. This does not imply denial of negative events, but why give those events more weight than the good things that happen? This also does not imply becoming a cavalier Pollyanna, for you can still maintain all of your critical faculties. You can hone your ability to see all sides of the events that pass by you and simply choose to emphasize the better aspects of those events.

### REFLECTION EXERCISE 1.5: Attitudes Toward Others

Think of a person or an existing situation in your life that causes you a moderate amount of difficulty (save the major pains for later once you're more practiced). Consider a list of all the negative and positive features of this person or situation, then focus your attention on the positive list, virtually discarding the negative. Think about what would happen if you were to approach this person or situation with this list, and only this list, in your awareness. This is not a list you would actually be sharing. It would simply permeate your thinking.

Should you wish to carry this exercise one step further, experiment carefully with carrying this attitude into actual contact with the person or situation. Note how your newly positive attitude affects the nature of your interaction with the person or situation and your feelings about it. The attitudes we carry very much affect how we actually feel. The cognitive-behavioral approaches to counseling have capitalized on this idea, much as did Norman Vincent Peale (1952) years ago with his book *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

One of the major benefits of having a positive attitudinal approach to life's fortunate and unfortunate happenings is the sense of control that it can give you over what transpires in your life. You are no longer simply at the mercy of life's "slings and arrows," and you will not be as buffeted by difficulty. You have little control over many of life's events, but you have a great deal of control over how you respond to them. Here is another experiment for you to try.

### REFLECTION EXERCISE 1.6: Approaching Life With Gratitude

Most of us experience an occasional morning when we wake up "blue," vaguely depressed, just a little off. We are a little more reluctant to leave our bed, and when we do there is a little less spring in our step. We're not clinically depressed, just off. Maybe something unpleasant happened last night, or maybe we're in a funk for no particular obvious reason.

On one of these mornings, try to simply assume a “chipper” attitude, choose to see all of the bright and wonderful things around you (or at least pretend they’re lovely), and then bluff it. Simply act as if life is grand for a few hours. See what happens. Fake it, as they say, until you make it.

This may seem simplistic, even inane, but it often works in profound ways. Why? We each create much of our own reality, and people respond to our energy, negative or positive, and that serves to reinforce the attitude and feeling state that is already present. Your attitude and projected feeling state have a synergistic effect. When you are positive and enthusiastic, people are drawn to you, almost as if feeding on the energy. When you are negative, cynical, or depressed, people either avoid you or join in on your rancorous mood. We all surely know the experience of being buoyed by being with someone who is positive and enthusiastic, as well as the downward tug of being with someone who is consistently cynical and negative. Indeed, there is nothing so unpleasant as finding yourself in a room full of cynical, depressed people.

Related to the concept of gratitude as a life attitude is that of forgiveness. By forgiveness I mean an attitude about life that is oriented toward letting go of the shame, resentment, and guilt you have directed toward yourself or others (Casarjian, 1992). This is a consciously engaged process, sometimes lengthy and difficult, in which a choice is made to no longer blame others for negative transgressions. It is, literally, letting people off the hook for real or imagined things that they have done to you and concurrently letting go of self-blame as well.

You may well ask why an attitude of forgiveness will help you be an effective counselor. Much of your work with clients will revolve around themes of shame, negativity, guilt, and blame. Before you can help them, you need to make peace with the negative themes of your own life. Terrible things may have happened to you personally, traumas and abuses that are excruciatingly painful to think about. Other abuses may have been subtle but perhaps even more insidious. Forgiveness does not imply not being angry about those events, but it requires engaging in a process of work and examination that can help to *detoxify* the hold those emotions have on you. It is actually more about letting yourself off the hook than it is about the other person.

As long as you are consumed by rage and blame over past abuses, you are controlled by them. If you are enraged, your rage ties you intimately to the objects of your resentment. Forgiveness is a process of working through the rage and blame so that those feelings no longer control you. This can be a major piece of work, which may call for personal counseling or engagement in some spiritual work. Learning the art of forgiveness is certainly a focal point for many spiritual disciplines. It is perhaps an interesting paradox that as you begin to be more forgiving of others, you also begin to forgive yourself. There is something about learning to be gentle with other people that allows you to be gentler with yourself.

## Counselor, Heal Thyself

About midway through their program of study, counseling students often begin to doubt themselves, particularly their own relative mental health and emotional stability. They ask, “How can I help someone else, when I’m such a wreck myself?” This is a legitimate question (and unfortunately too rarely asked by those who need to ask it most). There is such a lot to think about and work through. Your own personal family history, your work life, your loves, your other relationships, your belief system—not to mention all of the course work you are trying to absorb—can all conspire to make you feel inadequate. At times it seems too complex, too cumbersome to sort through, yet there are glimpses of light and clarity that can give you hope and inspiration. You will find supervisors, mentors, and guides—or counselors of your own—to help you shoulder the burden.

It is important to remember that this profession does not require us to be perfect people. If it did, it would be a lonely, unpopulated field. Some of your greatest difficulties and struggles may, in fact, become your greatest assets in understanding the pains and difficulties of others. It is all about the awareness and understanding—and the sense of humility—that you bring to your work, the capacity that you have for seeing yourself with all your strengths and blemishes, that will make it possible for you to work well with others (Gladding, 2002; Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff, Mussell, & Vye, 2005).

You need to give yourself the time to learn about this profession and about yourself. Even the simple reflective exercises in this chapter could take a lifetime to fully appreciate. The process of increasing your self-understanding and the parallel process of learning to work effectively as a counselor is a lifelong, magnificent journey. The two processes feed upon and nurture each other. In this mutual nurturance lies much of the great satisfaction of this work.

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## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

As the poem at the beginning of this chapter suggests, we are all looking for our particular path in the world, looking for just the right star to follow. In my case, the counseling profession has certainly felt like the right star, but my entry into this profession was similar to that of many others. I came to it indirectly.

Teaching was the work I trained to do in college. I decided to go into counseling as a professional while teaching as a Peace Corps volunteer in Jamaica. At the time, I was working in four rural elementary schools on Jamaica’s east coast (not the toughest of assignments), helping teachers in an in-service training program. I had spent my college career preparing to teach and was enamored with ideas of open education and experiential learning. I enjoyed my job and loved the people with whom I worked.

I hitched rides up into the bush to visit my schools, often on banana trucks or on donkey carts. The schools were simple, the materials primitive, and we did the best we could with what we had. Jamaica's beauty and the energy and passion of the people made up for what we lacked in school materials. It was a heady mix, that energy and beauty. It was certainly a wonderful work situation, a great coming of age and rite of passage for a young person on the brink of manhood, from the hills of Vermont.

I began to find, however, that what I most appreciated about this work was the more private one-on-one, or small group time that I was spending with people. I reveled in these more intimate conversations, sharing ideas, and being invited into people's lives. We talked about politics and about culture. My friends and colleagues began to share more personal issues. I thrived on these intimacies, these private conversations. I began to realize, however, that there were serious limitations in my ability to respond and that some of the problems my friends brought presented situations in which I was out of my depth.

Even more compelling, although certainly less acknowledged or understood, was my search for self-understanding and personal awareness. Having grown up in a home where there had been emotional difficulty, and having experienced a recent terrible loss, the death of a younger brother in a drowning accident, I was casting about for anchors and some ways of finding order in the universe. During my spare time, I began to read books in psychology and philosophy, and I was impressed by what I was reading in the humanistic psychology field, particularly that which related to the growing human potential "movement." The writings of Rollo May, Victor Frankl, and the existentialists captured me, and I particularly liked Sidney Jourard's emphasis on the need for authenticity and transparency in psychotherapists' work with people. I found the notion that psychologists could be real people—something other than the rat observers I'd read about during my undergraduate days—fascinating.

As I finished my Peace Corps career, I applied to graduate counseling programs. Now, more than thirty years later, after many years of graduate training and of working as a counselor, supervisor, and administrator in public and private settings, I thrive in a work situation that affords a satisfying bridge between the counseling and teaching worlds. I am teaching again, this time about counseling, preparing people to work professionally in the field. It's been a great working life, and it is now a pleasure to be able to share with you some of the ideas that have been gleaned from these years of working and teaching. I can only hope that your journey in this work is as satisfying for you.

## FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. What do you think should be the fundamental goals of counseling? Compare and contrast your ideas about these goals with what other professionals in the

field say. Either interview area professionals or review the literature to discover others' opinions.

2. What does the literature say about the role of love and fear in counseling?
3. Examine the literature regarding the reasons people want to become professional counselors. Which of these reasons do you think are legitimate? Which will necessitate personal examination and work? Why? How do these compare with your reasons for entering this profession?
4. Who are the seen and unseen mentors who have drawn you to this field? Have you read their written work? What is it about these people that you find compelling? If you haven't read their original writings, here's a suggestion that you do. Read biographies of their lives as well. Their theories are, after all, oftentimes extensions of their own lives.
5. What does the literature say about the importance of counselors being relatively healthy people? What does it even mean to be a "healthy person," and what does the literature say about this? You may want to consider expanding your investigation beyond the confines of counseling and psychology literature.
6. Contact one counselor working in a school and one in an agency. Interview these counselors regarding their job responsibilities and the rewards gleaned from this work. To what degree do you see yourself doing this kind of work, and in which setting?
7. What does the research say about the importance of counselors investigating and understanding their own values?
8. Some people have suggested that the children of counselors/psychologists are probably more troubled and behaviorally disturbed than those of the general public. Discuss ways of investigating this question, as well as its relevance for your work. Why is this an important issue to examine?

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