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### **Counselling skills and counselling training**

Counselling, as many other professions, require the acquisition of a set of skills. While biologically all people are capable of acquiring these skills, they are not born with them, but accumulated and crystallised during our life: we learn how to use communication, to achieve our purpose more effectively, how to contribute to and gain from the society, etc.

While any person is capable of acquiring these skills, these do not make a counsellor as the differentiation specifics of a counsellor are not these skills (as they belong to the specifics of a human), but their deployment for therapeutic purposes. Therefore, ideally, counselling training is not for providing counselling skills, but developing therapists.

However, as always with pedagogical problems, a number of factors enrich and concretise the general objective of counselling training. There are four major factors to account for: the objectives of counselling students, the level of training, the dynamics of the student group and the general philosophy of the institution and the tutor.

#### *Objectives of students and levels of counselling training*

Many students come to counselling training with the purpose of eventually becoming a counsellor. Some are told to take training (for example, by their workplace), some come to take courses only for the purpose of learning, some want the certificate, some want to learn the skills with the hope of improving their private or public life, etc. This diversity of objectives is particularly prevalent at basic or introductory counselling skills courses, but also exist at intermediate, or even at diploma level and here can cause a problem.

Against this backdrop of diverse objectives stand the standardised course content. This discrepancy, interestingly causes, less of a problem at basic counselling skills level, as these skills are easily perceivable for the students and justified by everyday interactions. In addition, the course may give an outlook or taster of the riches of counselling.

However, this may cause a problem to some students on intermediate counselling skills level, because the content of these courses is more complex, thus increasing the

chance that a large proportion of this content appears to be irrelevant to the students as they do not seem to fulfil their objectives. Intermediate counselling skills courses are not mere continuations of the basic counselling skills courses. The skills are new in the context of the logic and structure of the counselling theory taught on the course. Techniques are taught in the context of theory, self-exploration becomes a rawer experience (for example, at the residential weekend). This happens, because the intermediate course purposefully aims at exploring behaviours (among them the use of counselling skills) as manifestations of some invisible, latent factors. Understanding the self is a key aim of all intermediate courses, yet not an objective of many of the students on these courses.

Still, the most important watershed is the diploma in counselling course. The resource-intensiveness, the complexity of intricate inter-personal relationships of people involved drives very strong to develop a therapist. To be a therapist means being able to cope with ambiguity, uncertainty, deploying skills for the benefit of the client, using theoretical frameworks flexibly depending on the merits of the situation. Thus, diploma in counselling courses take a sharp turn: the previously inward-directed skills are now firmly outward-directed and the development of theoretical knowledge becomes a decisive factor of the future development of the students.

The diploma in counselling course thus create a straight choice for the student – either becoming a person capable of being a therapist or dropping out. Unfortunately, in the pressures of weekly lessons, assignments, hunting for placement the alternative does not appear with such a clarity to the student. It is often manifest in blaming (“*I didn’t expect this*”), dis-empowerment (“*I’ll never be able to do this*”), or excusing (“*others don’t have to do this*”). Thus, these students often become, deliberately or not, saboteurs of the development of others, they undermine the work of other students who often struggle with similar doubts: the seed of whining falls onto fertile soil.

### *The dynamics of the student group*

What we are is the internalised, processed interaction with our environment. To overcome the discrepancies between students’ objectives and the course content, the dynamics of the student group is invaluable. It may emerge as sharp conflicts, it may emerge as a quiet undercurrent, but it exists. However, there are two major factors that impede the healing effect of the group dynamics.

1. Most counselling courses are part-time ones, thus participants do not spend enough time in each other’s company to develop enduring social relationships and interdependencies that would enable students to stand up for the interest of the group as a collective (interestingly, Groupthink could, however emerge).
2. As counselling training, rightly, emphasises the right of the individual, students tend to extend this right to sabotaging the work and development of the group and its integral members.

In a healthy study group free riders, saboteurs and whiners are first offered help (with coercion) and if it fails, such members are excluded. However, the institutionalisation of counselling training impedes the development of such groups.

### *The philosophy of counselling training*

Dealing with intricate group relationships is a full-time job. However, institutions that provide counselling training tend to use part-time tutors, or in any case, tutors on whose time the call is so big that they have barely got any more time than the class.

Furthermore, cost cutting and falsely perceived cost/benefit analyses led to the emergence of training semi-skilled counsellors, that is people with the right skills, but without the personality and life strategy of becoming a therapist. This development has gradually crept in and quite incomprehensible as there is no such a shortage of counsellors that would justify the dominance of crash courses in counselling. Economics of training (funding for particular courses, league tables and success measured on intake and output) overtook the common philosophy of all counselling approaches: training people with the skills of therapists rather than training therapists. As a result, student groups play little part and learning becomes an individual process (while at the level of diploma students, participants should not be able to gain knowledge, without dispensing with knowledge) and it is measured on highly standardised and formalised assignments as examining is an expensive activity. Training institutions thus become unable to deselect students if necessary and it is left to an already overcrowded counselling market – Gresham's law operates here too.

### *Conclusions*

Is the picture so clouded with threatening lightings on the horizon? No. Only it shows that counselling training is subject to the same processes as other training processes. In addition, being aware of the above issues help addressing them.

CTPDC, because it is not dependent on external funding and because its tutors' livelihood does not depend on the courses, developed courses that attempt to address the concerns raised above.

The basic counselling skills course incorporates communication skills and a basic training of assertiveness thus enabling students to deal more effectively with situations of everyday life.

The intermediate counselling skills course, while provides a generous amount theoretical knowledge, aims at personal development. Thus, while students interested in personal development can meet this objective, other students go through the process in a firmly set theoretical framework.

The diploma in counselling course has two distinct parts. The first part explores the details and the unity of the therapist-client relationship, while the second part introduces rigorous counselling research that helps students to shake off their remaining preconceived ideas of inter-personal relationships.

CTPDC actively works on developing traditions, cross-class meetings and networking with the aim of encouraging the development of group dynamics and the development of responsibility in students for themselves, for their group and for CTPDC as a whole.