

## Some Guidelines for Counseling and Counselors!

**Michael F Shaughnessy\***

*Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, New Mexico, USA*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Michael F Shaughnessy, Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, New Mexico, USA.

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While most counselors have acquired a vast repertoire of skills and interventions, it is often important to reflect back on those skills and summarily review some of them when encountering a new client. Clients in the realm of neurology or neurological difficulties present different types of challenges, thus it is important to review some of the basic elements of counseling, both in terms of emotional issues, and counseling skills. The list below is simply a cursory list and should not be seen as exclusive, nor should it replace on going supervision.

- 1) Make personal contact. Counselors need to reach out to clients- emotionally, with eye contact with vocal comments with attention to the client's concerns, fears and body language.
- 2) Develop a working alliance. All too often, counselors neglect to remember that the counselor and client form a team. In the first session or so, the counselor should work- emotionally and with vigor to establish a working alliance. The client needs to understand that the counselor is more than just a trained professional but a caring individual who is there to support mentor, provide feedback, and be not just sympathetic, but empathetic.
- 3) Explain counseling to the client. On occasion, a client may have pre-conceived notions about counseling or psychotherapy or the therapeutic process. A client may expect to be hypnotized or a client may look for a couch to lie down on and free associate. In some instances, if the counselor is highly active directive as opposed to Rogerian non directive, this information may be helpful to clients to feel at ease and accepted. In some instances, a client may have heard about Gestalt therapy and look for an empty chair. In such instances, the client may need to know the difference in terms of group therapy and individual counseling and consultation.
- 4) Pacing is important. While this may seem self-evident, some counselors fail to take very simple things into consideration- such as the age of the client, the sex of the client, and the zeitgeist from which the client has come- a client who came of age during the 1960s is different than someone from the disco era of the 1970s, and the 1980s and 1990s and so on.
- 5) Leading may sometimes be important. In some instances, it is important to address what the counselor may see as the main, crucial issues that he or she sees as important. While smoking cessation is important, massive obesity may also be a major concern- as well as self-esteem, self-concept and self- worth.
- 6) Speak briefly. Don't overwhelm the client with overly long drawn out sentences in which you seem to be rambling and struggling with deciding what to say. Also, don't give the client answers to say to you. Often one or two words of comfort are appreciated, and one or two words that get the client g back on track are of value.
- 7) When you don't know what to say, say nothing or reflect. Don't be afraid of silence. It can be very therapeutic. Silence can allow the counselor time to catch their breath and decide on next steps.
- 8) Confront as much as you have supported. Some clients need to be confronted about their behavior, their illogical, irrational, their unreasonable, thinking and dysfunctional behavior. But they also need to be supported in changing, re-arranging and reflecting on their dispositions and philosophies and attitudes and behaviors.

- 9) Individualize your counseling. Often differentiated counseling is needed for a client who may have minimal insight, or a client is very intellectually oriented or perhaps even gifted.
- 10) Notice resistance (and file it away). Some clients do not want to talk about their childhood experiences. These experiences have had a deleterious impact on the client and are often left unexplored or unexamined. This is an important issue to think about. There is the phrase let sleeping dogs lie and in fact, it is often better to leave old wounds alone- until the client is ready willing and able to cope with them and address them.
- 11) When in doubt, it may be better to focus on the emotional side of things- what the client is feeling may be paramount, and focusing on feelings may also lend information as to the emotional lives of clients and in some instances, the emotional lives of clients are barren and bare or at minimum, emotionally bland and tepid if not insipid.
- 12) Counselors should avoid advice. There is an old saying that bright people don't need it and other don't or won't take it. Counseling is not giving advice- but perhaps is assisting clients in making choices- looking at long term or short term options or alternatives. Counseling is not giving advice- but perhaps helping clients to find their own pathway along their own journey.
- 13) Avoid premature problem solving. Work to form a relationship and rapport. Work on understanding and seek to understand things from the clients world or perspective. Discern interests and review the past life of the client and work to develop and maintain rapport.
- 14) Avoid relying on questions. Counseling is not an interrogation. Some clients have reported feeling that their past therapist as like a police interrogator. However, one may use fact seeking questions to either re-orient or refocus the client or to get specific information that you may feel that you need.
- 15) Listen closely to what clients say- both verbally and non-verbally and even when they do talk ad nauseum they may also be saying things that are very subtle and important.
- 16) Keep the focus on the client and not on extraneous details. While it is certainly acceptable to focus on the weather, the client is not there to discuss the wind, or the rain or the snow- although this may be an important part of their lives.
- 17) With certain clients it is important to be concrete and specific. Unless some formal Intelligence test has been administered, counselors often do not know the cognitive structures or skills of clients. It may be better to be concrete and specific until one really knows the intellectual prowess of the client.
- 18) Listen for metaphors and language and certain key words that are often repeated. Some clients use very telling language regarding their lives. They may describe themselves as a bull in a china shop or walking a tightrope all the time, or repeatedly using the word chaos or stress or frenzy to describe their lives.
- 19) Summarize- At the end of the session, it is important to summarize what has been reviewed, what has been discussed, your perspectives as to what has transpired- and what issues have been addressed.
- 20) Counselors and clients should not assume that change will be simple quick or easy. All too often, there is this presumption that counselors or therapists or even psychologists or psychiatrists can bring about meaningful long lasting change.
- 21) Do not assume or presume to know your client's thoughts, feelings, beliefs or behaviors. In fact, one may be concerned about clients outside of the office- and whether that client presents a threat to others- due to their anger management problems.
- 22) All counselors should work on developing and honing their skills and have a vast number of interventions and skills at their disposal. Counselors should develop their skills of probing, clarifying, reflecting, paraphrasing, validating, and summarizing.
- 23) Counselors may need to hone and develop certain special skills as they work with certain clients. These special skills may include crisis intervention, mental status exams, grief counseling, and most recently counseling survivors and their families after a school shooting.

- 24) Counselors should pay attention to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and all other issues that may come to the fore (devil worship, witchcraft, voodoo etc).
- 25) At times, a certain case may come to the counselor and the counselor wisely understands that the issues are beyond his or her competence level and that another more educated more qualified person needs to work with this individual for whatever reason. The counselor should refer carefully and explain the reasons for the referral. This may take several sessions, and it is important to understand the reason or reasons for the referral, so that the client does not see it as yet another rejection.
- 26) Remember confidentiality. All too often, some less than ethical people will try to gain access to information. All too often a construct that is clear to counselors (such as Low Frustration Tolerance) may not be understood by an attorney or policeman.
- 27) All counselors should at least attempt to document their work and keep progress notes and notes to the record regarding medication, specific events and the like.
- 28) Be persistent with no shows or clients who call to cancel at the last minute- this may be part of their personality, this may be part of their modus operandi and this may be what we call "grist for the therapeutic mill and should be used as material to be discussed. Lateness is yet another behavior that has to be examined.
- 29) Counselors need to be aware of their own personal, private, issues, weaknesses and foibles as well as their own agendas and as well as their own childhood experiences.
- 30) Be open to supervision and consultation. Counselors often burn out, become discouraged and it is important to understand the reasons for this and to work to prevent it.
- 31) On ethical issues, it is imperative to check and double check and consult with other colleagues.
- 32) Often attending conferences can provide support and often there are specific conferences on specific themes or areas of interest.
- 33) One key way to grow professionally as a counselor and to become more clinically astute is to listen to tapes and reflect on transcripts and possibly even take notes as to what was said when and how it was said- and what the reaction was (if any) on the part of the client.
- 34) Learn from other therapists. While not everyone likes supervision or consultation, a good deal can be learned from other therapists.

Often, we all need time to self-reflect and review our skills, our strengths and weaknesses and sadly our deficiencies so as to be the best that we can be in terms of working with our clients.

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