Basic Counselling Skills for Social Workers

About Counselling:
The relationship between client and counsellor is considered to be of prime importance in counselling. (Wolberg, 1988). There are two different approaches in counselling. Directive counselling where the counsellor assumes the role of an authority of offering the client an evaluation of the particular problem and suggests future course of action. In non directive counselling, the counsellor functions as an agent who encourages the client’s expression and feelings, reflecting these and helping the client to take responsibility for them (Rogers, 1942). In this approach, the client takes initiative in thinking out things for himself or herself, develops his or her own goals and plans or action.

Over time, counselling services and the methods used by counselors have become more and more diverse. Psychodynamic counseling remains a major theoretical approach, but many others have also developed with time and have been found to be equally useful (for example, person-centered, cognitive-behavioral, and integrative). Counseling practices have been revised and re-
evaluated time and again to see it’s relevance to marginalized and diverse groups such as lesbian, gay and bisexual people, people with disability, women facing domestic violence and so on.

**About social work and counselling:**

Social work is a profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IASSW and IFSW, 2001)

The knowledge base for social work practice has developed and is getting more and more refined over time. Similarly the discipline of counseling has also developed (McLeod 1998; BACP 2004) and practice in the two areas of work remain complementary. The historical interaction between counseling and social work is analyzed by Brearley (1991) who traces ways in which the two activities are intertwined and influence each other in terms of skills, knowledge and values and how the two disciplines have also developed distinct identities and training pathways.

**Settings of social work interventions and relevance of counselling:**

The social worker works in different kinds of settings such as community setting, school setting, institutional setting, hospital setting, crisis centers, trauma centers, vocational guidance center or industrial setting. They work with people either on individual basis or in the group depending on the mandate of the work.

Social work is a demanding profession wherein most often social workers need to play multiple roles while working in the community or in different settings. They are at times working as advisor, care taker, case manager, counsellor, activist or administrator. Considering this challenge the social worker can function well in most situations with acquiring some basic skill sets in counselling. Their role often demands that they learn to maintain neutrality and boundaries in their work. If they try to do this they will be able to deliver good services with minimum resources.
Social workers often deal directly with people unlike many other professions. Their work involves facilitating change. This change could be within an individual, in interpersonal relationships, within institutions or at a societal level. Since they work for change and change is something people or individuals try to resist. Helping a person or institutions to change towards growth or change in the way they are functioning currently is a challenging job. The social worker will face resistance and hostility at different levels or at different points of time in their work. The social worker needs to be aware of this phenomenon and also needs to be equipped with a skill set that will help him or her to overcome this resistance. Ability to form a relationship that consists of respect and trust is one of the key element in overcoming resistance while working with people. This is helpful even if you are working with person on individual basis, in a group or at family or at a institutional level.

Research studies have shown that poor service delivery can take place if social worker fails to develop trust among the stakeholders he/she is working with. It is extremely important to inculcate these skills in order to function effectively.

Social workers meet and work with people from a diverse range of experiences. The diversity can be in terms of gender, class, caste, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, abilities, physical, mental and so on. It is thus absolutely necessary that the worker has an open and accepting orientation towards people they work with. Developing relationships of trust and equality is something people can learn with practice and experience over a period of time. However these can also be learnt actively in training and inculcated as a useful tool to work efficiently.

**Core conditions useful in counselling:**

Here I use the basic framework of non-directive and person centered counselling as developed by Carl Roger’s (1942) as a guideline to develop basic counselling skills for social workers.

**Empathy:** Different from sympathy. There is a two memberedness (otherness) in sympathy and a sense of feeling pity for other person. This doesn’t help the person. Instead, empathy is when we try to understand the person’s internal world through his or her lens, keeping aside our own. Here
there is no two memberdness and there is a respect for the client’s feelings no matter how different they are from the counsellor.

**Genuineness:** Being who you are without pretense or hiding behind the “therapist” or counsellor’s role. It means being real person. Accepting one’s own limitations and strengths as well as having a genuine concern in well being of other person leads to this quality.

**Unconditional Positive Regard:** Accepting the person for who he or she is without putting any conditions on it. Keeping aside our preferences, judgments and biases or one’s own way of being; this quality can be enhanced with practice by working on oneself by being more and more accepting of diversity and respecting different ways of being.

**Self awareness** - Being open as a counsellor is a pre-requisite of this profession. However counsellors too are like any other person, part of the same society, hence they are not immune to carrying their own set of values, ideas and judgments into the counselling situation. Self awareness helps to understand one’s limitations, attitudinal or judgmental barriers towards specific issues or people. When one is aware about one’s attitude and value system, he or she can be aware in the session whether it is coming in the way of developing a counselling relationship with the client.

**How to begin the counselling work / setting up the session**

1) **Introducing oneself to the client**
   This consists of greeting the client using appropriate cultural norms and introducing oneself to the client. Sharing name and skill set that one has and what kind of help one can offer to the client. This helps the client to get a realistic perspective on what to expect and not expect from the counsellor and also helps to develop the focus and direction to the work.

2) **Setting boundaries and making appointments**
This is extremely important even when one is working in the community setting where the social worker is visiting families and talking to people in their own house. Boundary setting involves maintaining separation in the mind of the counsellor or social worker that he or she is a professional person. Also maintaining the separation (not two memberedness) of the issues or problems of the person or family helps in not getting completely enmeshed with the problem of the individual or the family and this helps the counsellor not feel overwhelmed by the situation. It is necessary to maintain neutrality with respect to the issues e.g. if a social worker is working with a family and he or she feels that the family is suffering due to the alcohol dependency of the head of the family and needs treatment for the same. But, if social worker gets enmeshed with family or head of the family and losses one's neutrality there are chances that he or she may fail to assess the family’s core issues. The family members or head of the family may underplay the problem due to their denial but, being neutral and objective, the social worker would be able to analyse the problem properly and put across to the family with conviction to enable them to take necessary steps.

Making appointment is also important in any setting. The client should be aware about whereabouts of the meeting place and timing of the next session. This helps in building trust and maintaining consistency in the work, for example, if a woman is discussing in the session with the counsellor/social worker her distress in her relationship with her husband about how she has not been able to assert herself and keeps compromising her needs; the woman wants help in learning how to assert herself and not compromise her needs in her relationship. The counsellor then needs to tell her that one possible goal of their work together would be learning assertiveness and that they will continue discussing this issue in the next session as well and see what can be done to break this pattern. If mutually they decide on the exact date and timing of their next meeting, it will help the woman to maintain the continuity of this issue in her mind and she will start working on the same in the next session without losing focus of the work.

3) **Sitting arrangement or finding space for the work**

The space where counselling will take place needs to have enough privacy. If we are meeting a person in his or her family and if other family members are present at that time,
then due to lack of privacy the person may not open up or may repeat the narrative of the family and may not feel comfortable to share their views, which maybe different from others. At such a time, one can gently request the other members to give privacy for a required period of time. If this is not possible, it will be helpful to check with the person about a good time when the counsellor can meet the person with some privacy. This can be discussed with person and time for the session can be fixed considering comfort and convenience of the client.

When meeting the person outside of the home, ensure that the space is relatively quieter and where there will be minimum distraction. The counsellor and the client should sit on the floor for the session, if there are no chairs for both the parties (as is often the case in community centres). Whether sitting on the floor or on chairs, there should be enough space in between such that the client does not feel intimidated and yet not so much space that the client would feel too distant from the counsellor.

Counselling skills

1) **Use of body language** The social worker or counsellor should be comfortable in his or her role. This helps the counsellor to be at ease and be comfortable leading to maintaining a relaxed body posture. Since the counsellor is genuinely interested in the client and his/her life and concerns, this shows through maintaining of eye contact, being alert and attentive while listening and talking. Counsellor also refuses to get distracted easily and tries to maintain the focus on the client completely.

2) **Verbal techniques**

   - Verbally “following” the client, using a variety of brief encouragements such as “Um-hm” or “Yes,” or by repeating key words that reflect what the client has been talking about, such as, ‘so you were very angry then?’
   - Observing the client’s body language and addressing it in the session, for example, “looks like you are feeling uncomfortable to talk”, “you are not sure whether I can be of any help to you” this helps the client to know that
the counselor understands and this in turn helps to build trust and be more open with the counselor

3) **Questioning or Probing** - This is an extremely useful technique that all counsellors use in their work. Asking questions, helps the client to give focussed attention to specific issues and explore his or her situation in depth, which is something that clients often do not do or are too overwhelmed by their situation to be able to do. This helps the client to focus on a feeling, situation, or behaviour that is troubling them and that they may not be paying attention to, knowingly or unknowingly. Probing may encourage the client to elaborate, clarify, or illustrate understanding of their situation and feelings more deeply. This needs to happen in a gentle and non-threatening manner. The counsellor needs to use open-ended questions here rather than close ended questions. For example, if a counsellor asks, are you in an abusive relationship? The client might respond yes or no and the communication may hit a deadlock. Instead if the counsellor asks the client how have you been in this relationship? this type of questions provides opportunity to the clients to talk about their relationship. The client can share the positive as well as negative side of the relationship with the counsellor.

4) **Active listening** - The counsellor deeply engages with the client and tries to listen to what he or she is expressing, not just the content of the speech but more importantly feelings behind what is being said. When the counsellor listens actively, the client feels free to share their life difficulties and issues with the counsellor. When the counsellor listens actively to clients he or she does not get distracted. The counsellor’s focus remains primarily on the client during the session. The counsellor listens carefully and tries to understand the client - what is troubling her, what kind of issues she has and what kind of help she will need. When the counselor listens deeply, it helps to develop trust and relationship with the client and this opens up the possibility of further work.
5) **Reflection of feelings**

This is an extremely important technique that gets used in counselling. When the counsellor is deeply engaged with client he or she can listen to the client’s expressed and unexpressed feelings, for example, the client says, “I have been in this difficult relationship for these many years and don’t know why it feels normal to me”. The counsellor is listening carefully to the client and observing that the client is numb. The counsellor will reflect back saying, “as if you have stopped feeling anything for a long period of time”. Such a reflection of feelings, helps the client to get in touch with the core emotion that the client may not be fully aware of or may not have engaged with as it maybe too painful or difficult to deal with at one’s own level. When the counsellor brings this to the client’s notice, they take it on board and may start to explore it further and work on it. Often clients may not be in touch with their difficult feelings because it is too difficult to face these on their own. They need someone to be with them in this process. When the counsellor does this, the client starts getting in touch with their feelings and it helps to deepen the counselling relationship as well. This also helps them to develop awareness of their feelings and the connection of these feelings to their difficult behaviours, e.g. “I go and drink in the evening because, I feel lonely and don’t know how to deal with my loneliness” or “I am not being able to leave the abusive relationship because, I am scared to be on my own”. Thus identifying troubling or distressing feelings is often the beginning for many clients to get a better understanding of their problems and start work on the same.

6) **Silence**

Silence is an important phenomenon that occurs in counselling sessions. This provides opportunity to the client to get in touch with his or her feelings and reflect upon his or her life. This is a time when the client does a lot of internal work. The counsellor needs to be comfortable during this moment. Sit quietly and be with the client and try to understand what he or she is experiencing. Allow him or her to be in that moment without any distraction or disturbance. The novice counsellor may get nervous or unsettled when there is a silence during counselling sessions. However
one needs to see the importance of this phenomenon and learn to deal with it. If the counsellor is deeply engaged with the client, he or she can reflect upon client’s feelings based on their judgement after the silence gets over. This helps the client to do further work on his or her issue.

7) **Summarising**

The counsellor should summarize the session in the end in a brief manner. This helps the client to maintain the focus of the work. It helps to do the closure of each session. It helps the client to see what is happening in the session, where they are with their work. It also provides focus for the session and helps to maintain consistency in the work.

8) **Termination**

This again is an important part of counselling work. Based on the focus of the work or the chosen agenda of the work the counsellor and client decide on how many sessions they will be working on with each other. They can take a review in between to see where they are going, whether it is in the direction of the chosen focus?, whether this is working for the client, whether the client is happy with the progress and so on. The counsellor should keep in mind that giving closure to work is important and he or she should never leave the work in between without saying good bye to the client. The counsellor should remind the client few sessions before the last session that their work is going to be discontinued soon. On the day of termination, the counsellor should listen to client’s feelings carefully. If a client is saying your help was not enough or it has not helped me, the counsellor should accept this fact gracefully. The counsellor should not get defensive and try to minimize the client’s feelings. The counsellor should accept honestly and genuinely saying something like, “looks like whatever we were trying has not helped you much”. These kind of genuine statements help the client.

10) **Taking care of oneself to avoid burn out**
This is extremely important and one of the most neglected part of training and work among counsellors and social workers. The settings where social workers are working are often challenging and demanding. They work with few resources and try to deal with many problems at times.

Certain settings such as domestic violence centers, trauma centers or institutions such as mental hospitals or institutions for the elderly can be taxing and demanding settings for social workers. One needs to be mindful about the same. One needs to have fair understanding and clarity in terms of limitations of the work, and personal limitations as well while dealing with such mammoth social problems.

Creating mechanisms such as getting a supervisor, having peer support or space to vent out one’s feeling about difficult settings helps to contain one’s own distress and frustrations. Often when social worker is working in the difficult setting or challenging settings for a long period of time he or she may start loosing neutrality and may develop negative feelings towards settings and people working in the setting that the social worker/counsellor may not be aware. If supervision or peer support is available they can help the counsellor/social worker to maintain neutrality and avoid negative feelings that might lead to burn out.

Counselors should take necessary steps to keep their health both physical and emotional wellness. They should organize their day and work in such a way where they will eat on time, ensure that they get enough sleep on regular basis. Some amount of physical exercising and meditation will help to take care of one’s body and mind. Taking vacations in between and doing things that one enjoys is also important. Pursuing one’s hobbies, listening to music, not taking work back home, not always discussing work at home or during personal time will help to restore internal resources.