## CHAPTER 2

### Getting Started
Skills and Tasks for Engaging a New Client

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Mary Rose O’Reilly, the educator and writer, relates a story told by a friend of hers about the preparation to “be present,” about getting ready to receive and listen to the concerns of another. The friend had gone to a Buddhist retreat, primarily as a way of dealing with some personal troubles. She asked one of the monks to talk with her about the things that were worrying her.

He told me to meet him in the garden, under the full moon. We sat down. He looked for a moment at the moon. Then he folded his robes under him and assumed the lotus position. He closed his eyes and said, “Now I am ready to listen.” I talked for an hour and then he said, “I understand what you are saying.” (O’Reilly, 1998, p. 31)

This monk is one who knows something about creating the space to be present, about “setting the stage.” You don’t need the robes, the moon, or the full lotus, but you do need to know how to prepare yourself to do this work. Good counseling practice begins with thoughtful consideration and planning of all the practical aspects of delivering your services. These are the “nuts and bolts” considerations that set the stage for effective counseling work with people. When approached with thoughtfulness and respect for how they will be received, these factors may greatly enhance your relationships with clients.

Exercising care with these practicalities is simply the first extension of the empathic consideration you try to build into your counseling relationships. These “details” convey much about you and about how you conduct your life. Your dress and your workspace say as much about you as does your explanation of your theoretical perspective and approach to the work. People can quickly begin to intuit your trustworthiness in the ways you explain the ground rules of your practice, or even in how you market your services. Far from incidental, these practical considerations form the bedrock of safety and security that are the hallmarks of all effective counseling.
In addition to your professional training and preparation, you will attend to four primary concerns before a client even walks in the door: (a) your personal appearance, (b) your workspace, (c) getting the word out about your services, and (d) finding a good supervisor. When you have fully attended to these concerns, you are ready to plan your first meeting.

**Personal Appearance: The Power of First Impressions**

I once worked in an agency where I supervised counselors who did presentations and prevention work related to substance abuse issues in local high schools. These two young men were popular with the kids, mostly because they were energetic and fun to be around. They believed strongly in the mission of their work, and their enthusiasm was contagious. The kids loved the way they dressed, which was much in the teen, young-adult fashion of the day. Despite their popularity with students, however, administrators had mixed feelings about these prevention workers. The administrators were convinced, simply by virtue of appearance, that these counselors used drugs themselves. On further questioning, they stated they were mostly concerned that the clothing was representative of an anti-authority, pro-drug attitude that they found troubling. They were primarily concerned—again, based solely on appearance—that the counselors were siding with students against the adult school authorities and its policies.

To resolve the issue, the administrators met with the counselors and shared their concerns. The counselors listened nondefensively, talked about their commitment to honor school policy and not undermine the administrators, and declared their disdain for drugs. The administrators, with their essential fears put to rest, let up on the dress issue. The counselors took away from this experience a heightened appreciation of the impact their appearance had had on these administrators. There is a lesson for us all here. The way we dress is representative of who we are, and it serves to provoke a response in the people with whom we work.

I certainly have recollections of the ways my own clothing and appearance have affected my clients. I vividly recall one such event with one of my first clients who was sent to me just after I’d established a new private counseling practice. He had been referred to me by the local court diversion program, which offered him counseling treatment in lieu of jail time. (It’s always flattering to be sought out as the more attractive alternative.) This young man walked into my office, sat down, looked me in the eye, and said, “I hate ties.” Given that this was in the days before I decided to steer a more casual clothing course, I was wearing one of my finest regal-striped silk ties. I was actually quite proud of my tie and thought it made me look pretty sharp and professional. I was, however, able to put aside my pride, and I was quick enough to correctly surmise that his comment really had little to do with ties and much more to do with his historical relationship with authority, which was represented by...
all of those whom he’d encountered in the world of “ties.” So we began a discussion about ties and all that they represented for him.

The tie was a provocative symbol for this new client of mine. In the absence of any real relationship, outward appearance was all he had to go on, and his suspicion was that I would probably be another authority figure who would try to tell him how to run his life. In the absence or lack of history of a relationship, appearance is all any of us have to go on. Whether your appearance is provocative, conservative, or gaudy, your clients will make snap judgments about your skill and professional abilities based on your “look.”

Being thoughtful and consciously aware of your personal appearance is important (Gutheil & Brodsky, 2008). There’s no getting around it—your attire and appearance will affect how your clients perceive your competence (Hubble & Gelso, 1978; Vargas & Borkowski, 1983). It is probably best to steer a moderate course when you dress for work (Heitmeyer & Goldsmith, 1990).

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RExercise 2.1

Your Appearance

Briefly close your eyes and envision yourself in your mind’s eye. See yourself standing, as if in front of a mirror. How do you appear? What is your general demeanor and appearance? How would you characterize your posture? Do you look comfortable? Do you like what you see? Take note of your hairstyle, your facial expression, and other obvious aspects of yourself. How are you dressed? What is your general impression of what you see in the mirror?

Consider how this view of yourself is the same or different from your picture of yourself 5 or 10 years ago. Note how these changes in your appearance might reflect possible changes in your life.

Now, consider the future. How do you think others will react to your appearance? What are your assumptions about their impressions? Will you change any aspect of your appearance when you meet with clients in the counseling workplace?

The Counseling Workspace

A primary consideration in getting started in any counseling practice—and this includes public, private, or a school setting—has to do with the place you choose to do your work, most likely some kind of counseling office. The best offices ensure privacy,
soundproofed, and feel comfortable to both you and your clients. The office is a sanctuary for your work, a place where the people you serve feel safe and protected. It must also be a place where you feel safe because some of your clients may be volatile. Physical safety issues (emergency exits, availability of other people for assistance, and so forth) should be a first item of concern when selecting your office space or evaluating the space provided to you. If you do not feel physically safe, you cannot provide any kind of emotional protection for your clients. Another important concern is sufficient parking and access for people with physical challenges.

The ideal workspace is a place where people can come to settle in and feel protected in this brief time-out from their regular lives. Your office should be neutral but not cold, the décor attractive and aesthetically pleasing. An office that is attractive and thoughtfully furnished is an asset to the counseling activities that happen there (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). If you intend to work with children, you should also take into account the need to have toys and room for activities as well as furniture of an appropriate size (Erdman & Lampe, 1996).

If your office is in a school, you may encounter some unique challenges in creating a safe, inviting space for counseling work with students or parents. School counseling offices often do not provide much privacy, and they almost always have common waiting areas where anyone can see which students are coming for help. Typically, there is considerable activity in the area outside of offices, with all the energy that children and adolescents can generate. If you will be doing school counseling, you might want to visit some of the counselors in other area schools to get ideas about how people create good counseling workspaces in those environments. It is your job to do the best you can to make these offices as inviting and as private as possible while sensitizing school boards and administrators to the real physical space needs of school counseling services.

Ideal office spaces are adequately soundproofed so that people in a waiting area outside cannot hear conversation inside the office. Double doors, extra insulation, and soft music piped into waiting areas are all potential soundproofing aids. Good office planning also permits clients to come and go without being observed by others (particularly their neighbors and friends—a common complaint from many clients of community mental health services). A storefront next to a large supermarket is a poor choice for an office. This is typically more of an issue in small rural towns than it is in larger metropolitan areas. Ideally, you may consider separate waiting and exit areas, perhaps allowing for some time in an exit area for clients to put on a “street face” before going back out into the world. It will sometimes be difficult for your clients to reenter the everyday social whirl after talking about intensely personal issues, and it can be very helpful if you give them some private time and space to decompress.

Similarly, if you have control over scheduling appointments, stagger appointments so that your clients do not encounter each other coming and going. Allowing for some time
between appointments can help to ensure that your clients will not run into each other, and it will also give you time to regroup between sessions. Just as your clients may engage in active fantasies about your life with your family, some will think about you with your other clients. That fantasizing is inevitable and may become part of the work the two of you do together, but it does not need to be made more intense by poorly designed spaces and tight appointment setting.

Over the thirty odd years that I’ve done this kind of work, I’ve had a wide variety of offices. One was in the back of a union hall in a rough neighborhood, another in an old farmhouse that was part of a residential drug treatment program, yet another in a downtown office building. For many years, my private counseling practice was held in a downstairs wing of my home, a place that was separate and distinct from the rest of the house, with its own bathroom and entrances. For personal convenience, I certainly enjoyed this home office arrangement, but I eventually gave it up and would think long and hard before doing it again.

I came to see problems associated with an office in the home, no matter how distinct and private the space seems. It’s too easy, even with the best precautions, for the occasional confusions of family life to intrude on the privacy of the counseling work.

There was, for example, the day that one of my clients had to pick his way over the fire hoses used by firefighters to put out a chimney fire and said something like, “Maybe this isn’t the best day to come.” I’m sure my counseling office didn’t seem like much of a sanctuary to him in the midst of all that. Then, there were the occasional children’s screams—no amount of soundproofing can block out all noise—and the confusion of cars coming and going in the driveway. I’m sure you get the picture.

Your desire to establish a space for personal convenience has to be weighed against the implications for your counseling work.

**Furnishing Your Workspace**

Your workspace should be comfortable for you and reflect who you are. Personal mementos, photographs, and artwork are all appropriate but should be carefully thought about in regard to their potential impact on people who come there. Anything you have in your office may serve as either a comfort or a distraction. Photographs of your family may signal to your client that, in fact, you do “have a life,” yet they may also provide opportunity for unhelpful fantasies and digressive conversations about the nature of your personal life. Your client may subtly engage in fantasized competitive struggles with your children or your partner—fantasies that are nurtured by your photos.

In one of my offices, I once put up some framed political posters I had recently brought back from a trip to Cuba. After contemplating them, one of my clients spent the better part of a session talking about the Cuban revolution and his dislike for Castro. We were able,
after some time, to turn this conversation in some more personally relevant directions, but I recognized that the posters were unnecessarily provocative. Shortly after that encounter, I took the posters down. Keep in mind that anything you have in your office may serve as an object onto which your clients may project thoughts and feelings.

Your furniture should be comfortable and inviting, but not overly intimate. Your office should communicate the message that this is a place for personal sharing, but not for seduction. Couches, for some clients, communicate too intimate a message, and two people (e.g., in group or couples counseling) may not want to sit so closely together. I favor comfortable chairs, a few feet apart, facing one another at an angle that allows not only for face-to-face contact but also affords the opportunity to look away. You want to maintain solid visual contact with your clients, yet sometimes they will need to visually get away from you, to go within themselves. Yalom (1985) refers to the best relationships we have with our clients as “interpersonal communion.” In contrast, those relationships individuals have within themselves he calls “intrapersonal communion.” Looking away allows for that different, inner, more internal introspection. Your chair placements subtly communicate your willingness to allow for both kinds of contemplation.

In arranging your furniture, give serious consideration to the possible need for flight in the event that a “difficult” client becomes threatening or loses control. It can happen. Positioning your chair closest to the door is one simple way to be prepared in the event that you are working with a potentially volatile person. With some clients, you will want to leave your door open so that others can hear you if you need to call for help. And needless to say, you should schedule appointments with possibly volatile clients at times when outside help is available. Chapter 10 deals specifically with how to respond to these difficult, hostile, or out-of-control clients.

You will most likely also have a desk and some peripheral equipment, such as computers, phones, filing cabinets, lights, and plants. Each of these requires thought and attention. The placement of your desk tells your client much about the power of the relationship between the two of you. If you sit behind it, the desk clearly states your desire to remain in the position of control and power. If you put it behind you, it suggests that the stage is set for communication between two equals. Computers and telephones have become an integral part of all of our lives and need to be managed so as not to intrude on real relationship encounters, particularly counseling relationships. Your phone should be silenced while you are working with someone, with no possibility that messages left on machines will be overheard.

Computer information should be held as securely as possible, with no screens visible to someone entering your office. The amount of client information now traveling in cyberspace is staggering, particularly billing and diagnostic data, and the potential for privacy and confidentiality violations is great. Be wary about the information you contribute to this cyber glut.
Also, live and work with the awareness that even the best security may not be foolproof. Someone once broke into my office, most likely someone looking for drugs. I am not a physician, so I don’t prescribe medications and would never have had drugs on site, but an addict might not stop to consider the nuances of professional affiliation in the desperate search to get high. Fortunately for me, the burglar was not interested in examining records but did manage to find some billing forms and start a small fire in a back room. The fire did minimal damage, but the whole incident drove home with brilliant clarity the need for secure record storage. Bad things can happen.

Many schools and agencies have specific rules and regulations related to the storage of information about clients, in either electronic or actual hard copy format. You will certainly want to become informed about these procedures; in the absence of such directives, take steps to ensure the privacy of all your record keeping (Nepo, 2010). You may also assume that at some point there will be a request to see your records about some client. Develop clear protocols for detailing the situations and the information you will share and the process by which you will share that information.

Finally, it is helpful to have a clock with an appropriately sized display conveniently placed so that both you and your client can see it. This allows you both to know how much available time remains. The issue of time and time management is usually a major factor in a single counseling session, not only for its own value but also for the metaphoric value it serves.

REFLECTION EXERCISE 2.2

Your Workspace

Sitting quietly, create a picture in your mind’s eye of your ideal workspace and its furnishings. What size is this space, what shape? Is it in a modern or an older building? Are there windows, and what kind of lighting do you have? What furniture and personal effects have you chosen to bring into this space?

As you imagine yourself alone in this office, consider the feelings that arise being there. Finally, if you have a real office now, how does your ideal space compare with the reality of what you now have?

Managing Distractions

A perfectly designed office is only as good as the way it is utilized. Answering the telephone while in the midst of some important career or college planning work with a student communicates a negative message about what you think of the relative importance of that...
student. Eating a sandwich while listening to a client’s disturbing stories of difficulties with an abusive spouse is another variation of this kind of disrespect. It is your job, your primary obligation in this work, to be as fully present as possible with your clients during those times you have committed specifically to them. You do not owe them your life, but you do owe them your undivided attention. If you are distracted while working, your client will undoubtedly know it (Shieh & Wang, 2007).

Make sure that unwanted distractions from the outer world do not invade this space while you are at work with someone. Handle outside intrusions, such as visits or phone calls from colleagues and secretaries, in a way that ensures you won’t be interrupted. Do not casually switch appointment times or take unannounced time away from scheduled time. Each appointment switch opens the door for clients’ speculation about their relative worth in your scheme of things. Some of your clients will have ample speculation of this sort, even without your provocation. There is no need to add fuel to the fire.

More subtle, but no less important, is the frame of mind you bring to the counseling session. Just as important as managing the external distractions that potentially threaten your time with a client is the way you manage your internal world of distraction. You have all of the chatter of your life—the shopping to be done, the bills to be paid, appointments with your kids’ teachers—with which to deal. Your real outer-world problems, as well as your own inner-world demons, may not only bedevil you but also serve to distract you from the work you need to do. Your job is to silence these distractions and demons in a way that allows you to be as present as possible for the person who sits across from you.

This is the rationale for the traditional “50-minute hour,” affording 10 minutes to purge yourself of the emotional grip of the last client with time to regroup to face the next client. Do whatever you need to do to maintain presence and focus, whether it is a quick walk around the block or a few minutes of meditation or simply sitting silently.

**Home Visits**

There may be job situations, or specific times, when you are not doing counseling work in any office. Your job may include outreach counseling, home visits, or allied counseling and case management work in a wide variety of settings. You might be a drug counselor working with addicts on the street or be part of a crisis intervention team being asked to interview a suicidal man at his home. Whether you are in someone’s home or out on the streets, try to provide privacy and ensure confidentiality as best you can, perhaps finding the quietest and most protected place possible, and simply work with what you have. Never forget to do all you can, particularly in these situations, to ensure your own safety. This may mean doing home visits with a partner. Do what is necessary to protect both yourself and your clients.
I know counselors and social workers who go to clients’ homes routinely as part of their work, and some enjoy and prefer home visits to work in an office. They say that particularly with people distrustful of formal settings, they can establish the kind of relationship that would never happen in an office setting. Some counselors especially like the firsthand look at family dynamics that these visits provide (Tury, Wildmann, Laszlo, & Dull, 2008).

Home visits can become problematic, however, if not handled carefully. I was once consulting with a family at their home when they told me that their 12-year-old son had recently stolen a car and run over and killed an elderly woman. They went on to tell me that he was hiding from the police in their back bedroom. This was in the early days of my counseling career, and I had made the mistake of promising blanket confidentiality with the family and what they shared with me, without discussing times when I would need to break confidence. In this case, there was a clear need to notify the authorities, and I had placed myself in a difficult spot. The parents and I together eventually successfully negotiated bringing the boy into custody; yet after that event, my relationship with the family fell apart. In addition to my error in initially promising total confidentiality, my supervisor and I both looked at the time I spent in the home as a negative factor. I became overinvolved in the family drama as an extension of the world of authority in ways that might have been avoided had I not met with them in their home. Home visits can present all kinds of unexpected challenges (Zur, 2007).

In some work situations, home visits are the expected norm (e.g., hospice counseling), or they may provide the best or only way of working. Some prefer to work with families in their own homes (Morris, 2003). Sometimes, a home visit or two is the best way to handle a new client’s culturally based suspicions of professional office settings (Bean, Perry, & Bedell, 2002; Cole, Thomas, & Lee, 1988; Leventhal, 2002; Norton & Manson, 1997). Except when the situation, for whatever cultural or other unique reasons, may dictate continued home visits (Kirkwood & Bahl, 2013; Phillips, Moneyham, Thomas, Gunther, & Vyavaharkar, 2011), your goal should be to establish a trusting enough relationship to bring the client into the office for subsequent sessions.

At some point in your counseling career, you may be expected to perform home visits, and you may even prefer to work in those settings. Simply enter each home with awareness, and pay attention to the dynamics as they unfold.

Getting Started

Getting the Word Out

Whether you work in an agency or a school, or have some kind of private practice, if you want to have clients come to see you, the community in which you work will need to know
you’re open for business. People need to know who you are, where you are, and what services you provide. It is your business to tell them (Walfish, 2010).

Establishing Referral Networks

The first step in launching your practice is to begin establishing your referral networks. In a public community counseling setting, this primarily involves letting people with whom you work in the agency know that you’re ready to accept clients and making sure that internal referral networks have you plugged into the system. These “networks” include secretaries, intake workers, and any colleagues who might be in a position to refer people to you.

Similarly, in a school counseling system, make sure that people know where you are and take steps to make your availability an integral part of referral processes. Other school counselors, teachers, school-based clinicians, and special educators are all potential sources of student referrals. Regardless of the setting, knowing how the formal referral mechanisms work is important as is developing good relationships with your colleagues.

The Mandated Referral

In any of these settings, you may at times find yourself working with a client for whom counseling has been “recommended” (i.e., coerced or leveraged) by someone who thinks counseling for this individual would be helpful. When these clients enter counseling, they are more “pushed” by outside forces and less “pulled” by their own volition. If you prefer to work with clients who come to counseling of their own accord, you will need to develop strategies for defining what kinds of referrals you want and communicate those definitions to the world outside your office.

Some counselors love to work with mandated, coerced clients. They love the action of dealing with the resistant drug abuser, the potential school dropout, or the incarcerated offender. If you would love this work and want to serve these kinds of clients, then contact lawyers, judges, and school officials, the people who would typically make such referrals. It may be possible to develop contracts or working service agreements with specific agents who might refer particular types of clients your way. Mechanisms of payment may also need to be negotiated, certainly if you are working privately. You will also need to make sure that referral mechanisms and expectations for treatment are clearly defined and articulated (Gondolf, 2009).

As a member of the counseling profession, you should never agree to work under circumstances where people must see you with no personal volitional choice whatsoever. Being coerced is not the same as being forced into counseling. Coerced clients may face serious consequences for noncompliance with treatment recommendations, but they are nevertheless coming to you of their own accord. Sometimes, the alternatives they face for
not seeking counseling are ominous (“Would you rather see the counselor or stay in your jail cell?”), but the element of choice is still there. This is also an ethical issue, a reminder that you are always providing service to the individuals with whom you work, secondarily to the systems that oversee them.

**Creating Incentives to Attract Clients**

If you choose to see self-initiated clients only, you will need to develop strategies to attract clients. What will make your service attractive and preferable to other opportunities available to people? Whether practicing publicly or privately, you need to acknowledge that sales is an integral part of your work. Call it marketing, call it outreach, call it by whatever name seems most palatable to you, but somehow get the word out.

It helps if you have some kind of “niche,” a counseling specialty for which you can become known in the school or community. Counselors who specialize in working with people with eating disorders or addictions or with difficult adolescents, children with special needs, or non-college bound high school students provide a particular community with a clear and accessible form of assistance. As in any community, the availability of your services will be passed around by word of mouth. You will need to develop a track record of good work with these special issues and populations if you want the referrals to continue (Blinder & Sanathara, 2003).

It is also helpful to think of incentives. In a school counseling setting, for example, what are the “carrots” that might entice students into your office? Perhaps not calling it “counseling” might be helpful. A number of school counseling programs promote certain of their services as “training” opportunities, in which students will learn techniques for working with others and receive lots of personal help in the process. The simple substitution of the word training for treatment suggests a far more positive activity, with far less possible stigmatization for participation. As shown in the boxed feature, this “training as treatment” model can be extremely effective in drawing in otherwise recalcitrant students.

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**Training as Treatment: Effective Marketing of School Counseling Services**

A friend of mine, “Heidi,” is a counselor working in a local high school who for many years has had outstanding success in drawing adolescents to her drug prevention programs. Early on in her work, she recruited an area training program, a prevention institute, to assist her in getting a range of in-school programs off the ground.

(Continued)
In this institute’s model, students are selected from around the state to participate in one-week training programs during the summer. Then, they go back into their schools and work with their school counselors to create school-based, relevant prevention programs. The one-week summer program has a variety of informational sessions on family dynamics, substance abuse in families, and interpersonal communication skills. It is packed, in other words, with some great psycho-educational counseling material, tools for students to use both personally and with others.

In Heidi’s school, students who have been through the program are involved in selecting the next year’s group of participants. Getting into these training programs and being selected as a “prevention trainer” has become very competitive. Students in this school are hungry for this training and are eager to be selected to do this group counseling work. Even though they are indirectly being helped in these trainings personally, the fact that they are receiving training to help others serves to elevate the status of the activity.

A simple renaming of “counseling” or “treatment” as “training” may destigmatize the way people perceive your services too. Some school counselors have had great success in attracting students to counseling via the creation of peer counseling programs. I know other school counselors who have become incredibly creative about the titles they invent for the groups they run. The “Banana Splits” certainly sounds a lot less stigmatizing and more inviting to a middle school child than does, say, “Children of Divorce Group.”

Sometimes, academic credit can be arranged for psycho-educational counseling activities in schools. More tangible rewards, such as food, are sometimes held out as incentives. Pizza or ice cream can be powerful incentives for omnivorous teenagers. If incentives are to be used, you’ll need to feel comfortable with whatever the rewards are (Ducharme, Knudsen, Abraham, & Roman, 2010).

Naturally, if you work in another kind of counseling setting outside of a school, you will similarly strive to think of ways that will make your counseling services attractive to potential clients. Some community-based programs even pay people—with cold, hard cash—as incentives for participation (Reid, Bailey-Dempsey, Cain, & Cook, 1994). Experiments in the use of cash incentives have also included attempts to assist in teen pregnancy prevention (Dolgan & Goodman, 1989) and to help clients lose weight (Jeffery, Gerber, Rosenthal, & Lindquist, 1983). Whatever kinds of appropriate incentives you use, they should make your counseling services attractive to those who might benefit from them.
Use of Media for Making Your Services Known

Billy Graham once remarked that his product, Jesus, was certainly a lot better than soap, so why shouldn’t he try to sell Him at least as well as Proctor and Gamble sells soap? It’s a crass analogy, perhaps, but you could say similar things about the product we “sell.” In a consumer society, if we want people to avail themselves of what we do, we need to play the marketing game well. We can do this with proper perspective, however. Foremost in this perspective, we need to market ethically, meaning without detriment to our clients or our profession, but we do need to learn how to let the community know about what we do and to help them see our work as an integral part of community well-being.

Counselors sometimes use media, particularly print media, to market their services. There are persuasive arguments on the side of effective marketing. Wittman (1988) argues that new counselors need to become conversant with a consumer-oriented model of counseling to effectively provide service to the community. Gilchrist and Stringer (1992) provide solid guidelines for counselors who want to market their services professionally and ethically. They, as well as others (Fong-Beyette, 1988; Stadler, 1988), say that a marketing strategy should never demean the profession by way of gimmicky advertising and that all strategies should be congruent with sound counseling practices and ethical considerations.

Community Service—Making Your Presence Known

Too many counselors simply wait in their offices for people to come to them. You need to be out in your community, serving on committees, providing assistance related to your specific skills, and participating in the world in which you live. All of these involvements will serve your community and will enrich your counseling work. Not all of these services will be financially reimbursed, but they may be seen as part of the professional community service role you play. Further, there is indirect benefit in that these involvements will alert people to your presence and the services you provide.

Naturally, the best insurance for steady referrals is doing good work. Whether you work in a school setting, in a jail, or in a community mental health clinic, the word will get around if you are a concerned and helpful ally and a worthy advocate. It will also get around if you are not. Learning to do this work well, with minimal distraction from your personal life, is the best way to guarantee continuing counseling business.

Finding a Good Supervisor

Central to any competent counseling practice is appropriate supervision (Berzyak, Ososkie, Trice, & Yeager, 2010). It sometimes comes as a surprise to new counselors-in-training that supervision is an expected, integral aspect of counseling work. They have
typically thought of a supervisor as someone who passes the dictates of management down to the workers, the supervisees, makes evaluative judgments about work performance, and makes reports about their work to management. That is certainly the model of supervision used in many organizations.

The concept of supervision in counseling is different. In this profession, the clinical or school counseling supervisor is meant to serve the supervisee as a support person, as a mentor and a guide. This is a person to whom a counselor can turn when troubled or when undecided about how to handle a difficult client. The supervisor is a confidant, a co-conspirator. If counseling were a National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) event, the counselor would be the driver and the supervisor would be part of the pit crew.

In some senses, a good supervisory relationship runs exactly parallel to the counseling relationship, with many of the same ingredients inherent in the effective counseling relationship (Beyer, 1995; White & Queener, 2003). If, as Rogers (1951) asserts, the counselor is to provide ample respect, genuineness, and positive regard to those she serves, then so does the supervisor provide those same things to the counselor under supervision. The capacity for empathy, the ability to understand and see the world from the other's perspective, is key to both successful counseling and supervision, and good supervisors have ample capacity to provide empathic presence. Counselors talk of the supervisor as someone to whom they can turn when in real difficulty, as well as for routine matters of consultation. In surveying the literature and professionals working in the field, Carifio and Hess (1987) and M. Smith (2000) identify a number of characteristics of ideal supervisors. Summarily, these include the following:

- Having empathy, respect, genuineness, and concern
- Being invested in the supervisee
- Having a working knowledge of human behavior and the counseling process
- Using appropriate teaching, goal-setting, and feedback mechanisms

A good supervisor may be hard to find. If your clients have multiple, co-occurring disorders, you may even need more than one supervisor with expertise in those areas of complaint. It is your job, an ethical expectation, to find a competent supervisor in the event that your school or agency doesn't automatically supply one. Unfortunately, our profession suffers from too few opportunities for learning how to do good supervision, a lack of clarity about legal implications for supervisors, and a dearth of the kinds of research evidence that might provide guidance for solid supervisory practice (Goodyear & Bernard, 1998; Herlihy, Gray, & McCollum, 2002; Osborn & Davis, 1996). All of these issues conspire to make the search for quality supervision a sometimes cumbersome process.
School counseling settings can be particularly difficult places to find consistent, ongoing supervision. Roberts and Borders (1994) suggest that school counselors are a little like cacti in that “both survive on a minimum of nutrients from the environment” (p. 149). They argue that school counseling supervision is often simply dressed-up administrative direction. Good supervision should certainly encompass much more than that.

Despite the obstacles to finding a trained supervisor, you should be able to find a master counselor who, even though she may not have had formal supervisory training, is capable of providing supervisory support for less experienced colleagues. The importance of good supervision—including during your internship and practicum experiences (Studer & Diambra, 2010)—cannot be overstated.

Also, there are models for developing peer support networks in places where supervision may not be readily available (Crutchfield & Borders, 1997).

When you are trying to choose a supervisor, look for a person who is empathic, respectful, and receptive to your ideas. You also want a supervisor whom you admire, a person who will be a kind of mentor, perhaps with a theoretical approach you would like to emulate. This is someone who will be as much teacher as counselor, and you want the lessons to be ones worth learning.

No matter what her theoretical orientation, level of personal warmth, and professional expertise may be, a supervisor also needs to have time for you. She needs to be available, not only for those emergency crises that may arise but also for the regularly scheduled times you are supposed to meet. Supervision should not be seen as expendable, as an add-on service, and this understanding should be clear from the outset. The time set aside for supervision should be inviolate for both counselor and supervisor. Undoubtedly, emergencies will arise that will necessitate canceling a specific supervision session, but if these emergencies become regular events, they signal difficulty, either with organizational functioning or with supervisor commitment.

Finally, in addition to personal characteristics and availability, the ideal supervisor is unconnected to organizational evaluation of the counselor’s work. Your supervisor, in other words, should not be making recommendations to the administration about your job performance or relative worth to the school or agency. Your supervisor should be a person to whom you can turn at your most vulnerable times without fear that your job will be in jeopardy if you talk of your perceived personal inadequacies and your mistakes. This means that you may have two supervisors, one to whom you answer administratively, the other a trusted confidant and mentor. For your day-to-day work, an on-site administrative supervisor can provide adequate organizational and legal support. You may need to look outside your work setting for that other kind of supervisor, the one who lends emotional and clinical support.
Planning for Your First Meeting

Your first meeting with a new client is one of the most important times you’ll spend with the client, for it is in this meeting that the client will make essential decisions about continuing. You might plan, if you have the latitude, on some extra time for this first session so that you can accomplish all that needs to be done. This extra time will be well spent if it pays off in fully engaging your new client (Tryon, 2002).

Broadly, you will be trying to accomplish three primary goals for this session: initial engagement (providing support and engaging the client in the process), education (giving the client information about counseling and about how you work), and assessment (beginning to ascertain this person’s strengths and deficits).

To build rapport, a bond between you and your client, you will need to use all of your empathy-building skills to communicate your concern and understanding (Lyddon, Clay, & Sparks, 2001). For the client, engagement means not only feeling a rapport with the counselor but also believing that coming for counseling was the right decision. The client will be motivated to come back only if she leaves the first session with the hope that future sessions will be productive. The support you provide, as well as engaging and educating the new client about the process of counseling, will take up the bulk of this first session. The skills you’ll use to build rapport while assessing your client’s needs are discussed thoroughly in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Before we go on, let us look at the practical matter of educating a new client about the counseling process in the first session.

Letting a client know what to expect from counseling, and what will be expected of him, has both practical and ethical value. You also want him to know that you want to meet reasonable expectations that he has (Swift & Derthick, 2013). You need to provide new clients with information, so plan for enough time in the first session to cover all the essentials. Here are some typical things you will need to cover in this first session:

- **Information about counseling and about how you work.** Some of your clients will have little or no experience with counseling and will want to know how this is going to work. A new client needs to understand what is to be expected of him. A new client might need to be told, for example, that it will be his responsibility to bring in material to talk about. As another example, this could be a good time to tell a client that you’ll expect him to do homework assignments or other outside work.
- **Your qualifications.** A new client has a right to know about your professional background as it relates to your work with him. You can provide this information briefly for those clients who want to know.
- **Fees.** This is a time to talk about how your client will reimburse you for services, whether it’s via insurance, direct payment, or some kind of sliding fee scale arrangement. School counselors, naturally, are exempt from this kind of information giving.
• **Ground rules.** Clearly articulate the rules that will help to keep this counseling relationship secure. Times and length of meetings, confidentiality and its limits (e.g., with whom you’ll share information, such as parents or insurance companies, and what kinds of information will be shared with them), including when you might need to report to outside authorities (in the event of abuse or risk of harm, for example), are all ground rule items that your client will need to understand.

• **Informed consent.** Your client needs to be fully informed about the counseling process and about how all information about him, including any standardized test results, will be used (Kress, Hoffman, Adamson, & Eriksen, 2013). If you think you’ll recommend any testing, your client will need to understand something about those tests and what they mean. This may, of course, eventually be part of a longer conversation when the testing is done. Finally, do all you can to make sure that the information conveyed to your client is given in a way that will be understood and will also contribute to the development of the therapeutic alliance (Pease-Carter & Minton, 2012).

This is a lot of information. It is a lot for someone under the best of circumstances to remember. In this situation, however, you’ll be giving this information to someone who feels vulnerable and is perhaps highly anxious (Moursund & Kenny, 2001). Because of this vulnerability and anxiety, the client may be only partially capable of retaining much of what you say. For this reason, many counselors I know hand new clients a fact sheet with much of this relevant information on it, so that clients can take it home and read it later. It has been my practice to do a brief overview of the most critical information with a new client in the office and then to also send him home with a fact sheet.

Sandwich this information in and around the support you’re providing, and make it an important part of the engagement. Try to make the information manageable and understandable, but don’t let it dominate the session. Your client has come to you for help, and he wants to tell you his story. The information should help to support the hope you hold out for positive things happening between the two of you.

> **When in doubt, make a fool of yourself. There is a microscopically thin line between being brilliantly creative and acting like the most gigantic idiot on the earth. So, what the hell, leap.**  
>  
> (Cynthia Heimel)

### The First Contact

Starting a new counseling relationship demands that the counselor be able both to get the mechanics of the counseling relationship up and running and attend to the needs of the incipient relationship itself. Engage your new client in relationship with you, and find out...
who this new person is and why he has come to see you. This requires the ability to juggle some complexity and ambiguity. It is also helpful if you can tolerate a number of things going on at once, not necessarily in linear fashion. Experience will be helpful as you learn how to efficiently weave together engaging your new client, educating him about the process of counseling, and beginning the process of assessment.

All of these things you do with a new client should conspire together to create an empathic context within which the two of you can work. The working alliance between the two of you is nurtured by your ability to be present with genuineness, positive regard, and respect, all of which convey your empathic acceptance of this person. Each of the things you do and say, including your verbal and nonverbal behavior, is relevant to empathic communication. The importance of this empathic foundation is discussed more completely in Chapter 3.

Following are some of the skills you can use to engage your client. This single-skills approach to learning how to be an effective counselor, sometimes referred to as a “microcounseling” approach (Ivey, 1971), gives you a foundation upon which you can later learn how to effectively integrate and use the skills collectively.

Nonverbal behavior—both your own and your client’s—is a good starting place. Much can be conveyed without saying a single word. In addition, questions, silence, and simple prompts can be used to draw your client into relationship with you and help you understand his reasons for seeking counseling.

**The Importance of Nonverbal Behavior**

I was once asked to take on as a new client someone with whom a counselor friend of mine had been working. She was having trouble working with him, she said, because she had gotten frustrated with the man’s jailhouse mentality and his resistant behavior. She felt that they hadn’t accomplished much together and that it clearly was time for someone else to try to work with him. I made an appointment to see him the next week.

When it was time for the appointment, he walked into the office, sat down next to my desk, and put his hands on the desk in front of me. He was smiling and seemed affable enough, but his hands were rolled up in fists. Crude tattooed letters, one per knuckle, stared up at me. The four letters on his left hand started with the letter “F,” the three on his right, with “Y.” Despite this display of limited vocabulary, the message was clear.

I didn’t need many of my years of professional training and work experience to know that this was a young man with some “issues.” I had watched him walk into the office with a gait that was controlled and filled with tension. His facial features, his posture, and his overall demeanor radiated defiance. And then, there were the hands. I could simply look at this
graphic message on his hands and begin to speculate about the abuses and trauma that he had perpetrated and to which he’d been subjected. I knew that he was probably similarly sizing me up. He probably looked at the way I dressed as representative of established authority and assumed that the fact that this meeting was taking place in my space meant that I had a lot of control about the way this counseling thing was going to go.

Volumes of information are available to you about your client, as well as to your client about you, in this time before any words are spoken. The way someone enters your workspace, the style with which he presents himself, his appearance and dress—all of this is important, observable material, and it may even subtly impact some of your initial reactions to him (Tryon, 1992). Similarly, the way you nonverbally present yourself is an important opening clue to your client about what he can expect from you. If you have the opportunity to observe someone before your actual first interaction, capitalize on the opportunity to watch without being involved interactively. I am not advocating actually spying on new students or clients, but oftentimes it is possible to simply observe someone as he approaches your workplace.

The office I use for my counseling practice offers a good view of the parking lot and the outside grounds. I am able to watch a new client park her car and walk along the gardens and lawn to my office. All of this observed behavior becomes grist for the therapeutic mill. I watch how she carries herself, how preoccupied with herself she seems to be. Is there a skip in her gait, or is it heavy and ponderous? Can she take in and seem to appreciate the beauty of flowers and trees, or is she so wrapped up in herself that seeing outward is not an option?

Your ability to make mental notes of these styles and modes of behavior can be extremely helpful as you contemplate the ways of talking with someone. Similarly, your ability to respond to shifts in nonverbal behavior during your time with your client will play an important role in the outcomes of that work (Highlen & Hill, 1984). Practiced observation, particularly as part of skills training in nonverbal communication, can improve your effectiveness in this arena (Grace & Kivlighan, 1995).

**Becoming a Student of Nonverbal Behavior**

There is a wealth of information in how people carry themselves, if you can see it. The body tells you a great deal about a person’s place in the world and about his attitude. Counseling theories that focus attention on the body as a vehicle for therapeutic work, such as bioenergetics (Lowen, 1958), gestalt therapy (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951/1994), and Reichian therapy (Reich, 1949), contend that our bodies carry all of our emotional history and that we adopt characteristic body postures (e.g., tight shoulders, clenched jaws, frightened eyes) that betray our history. While Reichian therapy and bioenergetics are not widely practiced today, our everyday language nevertheless still speaks to this characteristic body posturing (E. Smith, 1985). “He carries the world on his shoulders” describes the
toll responsibility can take on one. “She looks like she wants to bite somebody’s head off” describes another’s aggression. “He looks like a deer in the headlights” is an obvious reference to how fear can be reflected in our eyes. These common expressions speak to our collective understanding of the relationship between thought, feeling, and the body.

The more you can observe people and their bodies, in all kinds of settings, and the more you read what others have said about the relationship of the body and the emotional health of the person, the more adept you will be in taking stock of the nonverbal behavior of the clients who come to you. Reading about any of these body-oriented theories can provide further assistance in understanding the nonverbal behavior before you, as well as your own.

Although there is obvious danger in reading too much into client nonverbal behavior, it can provide wonderful clues as to who this person is. The number of clues that reveal themselves will depend on your ability to be observant. You certainly do not want to make assumptions about this new person or use your observations as a means for challenging her about incongruencies between what she says and how she behaves nonverbally (e.g., smiling while talking about emotionally difficult material), even though some evidence suggests that nonverbal behavior may more honestly portray someone’s real thoughts and feelings than what the person tells you (Erickson, Rossi, & Rossi, 1976; Passons, 1975). Cautiously consider how to use your observations once a relationship has been developed and your working alliance is solidly established. The nonverbal behavior you observe at the beginning of the relationship can suggest avenues for future sensitive verbal exploration and assessment.

### REFLECTION EXERCISE 2.3

**Observing Nonverbal Behavior**

Commit some time to observing others’ nonverbal behavior. Pick a place where you can sit and watch people unobtrusively. A public gathering place, such as a cafeteria or library, can be a good place for this. Watch people as they move, sit, eat, and talk. Watch them when they are alone as well as when they are in interaction with others. Note differences in their behavior when they are alone as well as when they are in interaction with others. Note differences in their behavior when they are alone or with others.

Focus your attention, again unobtrusively, on a single person’s nonverbal behavior. Pay close attention to how this person carries himself in his body. What is his relative physical comfort level? If he has physical limitations, how do these seem to relate to his emotional well-being?

What assumptions might you make about this person’s intellectual and emotional life based on your observations of his nonverbal behavior? Could you speculate about this person’s interpersonal history based on this observed information?
Taking Stock of Your Own Nonverbal Behavior

The ability to observe a client’s nonverbal behavior is important, but so is your awareness of your own nonverbal behavior. Significant evidence suggests that the counselor’s nonverbal behavior plays an important role in interactions with clients (Hill & Stephany, 1990; Kim, Liang, & Li, 2003; Smith-Hanen, 1977; Tepper & Haase, 1978). The way you present yourself, your own nonverbal behavior, should be intentional and thoughtfully designed—in as natural a way as possible—to increase the potential for building a connection with this person who has come to see you (Barak, Patkin, & Dell, 1982; Norman, 1982). Use the next Reflection Exercise to explore your own nonverbal behavior and that of a partner.

REFLECTION EXERCISE 2.4

Communicating Through Nonverbal Behavior

Pick a partner to help you with this exercise, which should take about 10 minutes to complete. Sit facing one another. Tell her that you are both going to sit there for about 5 minutes being aware of each other but saying nothing.

As you face this other person, simply sit quietly and observe her. Take in all you can, using all of your senses. Don’t limit yourself to what is visually observable, but note even the smaller things like the particular smell of perfume or cologne. Note what happens when eye contact is made, and try to maintain silence throughout.

After a minute or so, focus on your own nonverbal behavior. Try to communicate your own receptiveness and openness to her. Make a mental list of the behaviors you are trying to use to communicate this openness.

Then, change your focus to your partner. What kinds of silent cues emanating from this other person seem like invitations to talk? What do you see that increases your desire to talk with her? What behaviors seem less inviting? Make a mental list of all of these, still sitting there quietly.

Spend a minute or so making note of what thoughts and feelings you had while doing this exercise. How much were you influenced, particularly in how you felt, by this other person’s presence? Were you distracted from clearly observing the other by thinking about your own presentation? To what degree?

(Continued)
Taking Control of Your Nonverbal Behavior

The lists of nonverbal behaviors my students have generated over the years bear remarkable similarity to the nonverbal behaviors researchers have identified that can influence interpersonal communication (Barak et al., 1982; Norman, 1982). Some influential nonverbal behaviors that seem to help, as well as some that hinder, our ability to connect with clients include the following:

- **Facial expression.** Is your face relaxed, smiling, or pinched up, holding tension and tight, unsmiling? How natural and spontaneous are your facial expressions? We communicate much of our internal world with our faces. Is what you communicate congruent with how you feel and what you want to communicate to your client?

- **Body language.** Are you sitting with reasonably good posture, in an open, straight-ahead fashion, or are your arms and legs crossed protectively? Are you reasonably still and comfortable or nervous and jittery? Do you occasionally nod your head in understanding (I hope not so much as to look like a bobblehead doll)? Are you expressive with your hands and arms without being overly dramatic?

- **Eye contact.** Are you comfortable looking into the client's eyes, those “mirrors of the soul,” or are you looking down or away? Are you able to afford your client some inner privacy by looking away occasionally so as not to become overly intimate or invasive?

- **Voice tone.** Beyond whatever you say, the way it is said can have a great impact on your client. A voice that is gentle and soft, yet clearly heard, communicates respect and a desire for engagement.

Simply becoming more aware of your own nonverbal behavior as you interact with others can be helpful in creating a receptive, engaging environment.

There is a danger, of course, in becoming overly sensitive and so concerned about all of this that you end up being more constricted and unnatural. Find a comfortable balance between
the thought and attention paid to your own nonverbal behavior and simply assuming a natural, relaxed, personal way of being with people. As with so many of the counseling skills you are learning, your comfort level will improve with practice. Experience will enable you to let go of your judgments about how you should be behaving nonverbally.

**Cultural Influences and Your Nonverbal Behavior**

Cultural influences also affect an individual’s use of the body as a communication tool (Watson, 1970). Take stock of your nonverbal behavior in terms of your own cultural background and learn to modify it to communicate effectively with clients with different cultural traditions. There are different cultural comfort zones regarding physical proximity and eye contact, for example. Latinos are much more comfortable with close physical proximity, as a case in point, than are Italian Americans or Irish Americans (Sue & Sue, 1990). In contrast to what we talk of here as establishing good eye contact with your client, some Asian Americans may consider too much intimate eye contact disrespectful. African Americans may maintain better eye contact while talking than while listening (Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 1993).

All of this implies that learning the nonverbal language of clients from different cultural backgrounds is part of the business of becoming an effective counselor. Engage all of your cultural empathy and observational skills to take note of your client’s comfort zone regarding the varieties of nonverbal behavior and learn which of your behaviors seem to elicit the most significant positive and negative reactions. You can also invite your client to become your teacher about some of these nonverbal reactions, perhaps even initiating discussion of these comfort zone concerns.

**Observation of Nonverbal Behavior on the Website: www.sagepub.com/hutchinson3e**

Watch the counseling session titled, *Cultural Issues in Counseling With an Adolescent Client*. In this session, the counselor, Anne, is trying to engage Jane, who is role playing the young woman client who is having difficulty in school. Also, watch the follow-up review and feedback session that follows this session.

Take note of the nonverbal behavior of both the client and counselor. Consider the following:

1. What, specifically, about the client’s nonverbal behavior communicates how she is feeling?
2. Does the client’s nonverbal behavior change over the course of the session?
3. What counselor nonverbal behaviors do you think play a role in communication in this session? And are they useful in promoting communication?
4. In the review session that follows the counseling interaction, some comments are made about the use of nonverbal behavior, including seating positioning.

Do you agree with these comments?

**Finding Your Nonverbal Behavior Balance**

You want to be able to manage your own nonverbal behaviors while taking stock of those of your client. Don’t get so hung up in thinking about your own nonverbal behavior that it distracts you from the real business at hand—observing your client. This suggests a fundamental law of counseling: The more you are focused on yourself, particularly with communicating some kind of image, the less you are focused on the other.

Check in with yourself, with your ideas and feelings, mostly as a way of checking your responses to this other person for the purpose of understanding him. But never lose sight of that fundamental law because the degree to which you are concerned with your own performance, with presenting some image of yourself—even if it is the image of a competent counselor—is inversely related to your capacity to truly understand and respond to this other person as a competent counselor. As is true with so many aspects of this work, the goal is to achieve a balance, in this case a balance between self-awareness and non-preoccupation with self. This will become clearer as we talk more of the complexity of these developing counseling relationships.

**Using Questions for Fact-Finding and Engagement**

Questions are one of the primary tools at your disposal in the information-gathering process, but they should be used judiciously and only as needed. You will need to ask questions of this new person who has come to see you. For example, you will want to find out her reasons for coming, and there may be some general or specific information about her that you need to know. In most counseling situations, you will have a plan for gathering the kinds of information you need (Nash, 2003).

Much of our social conversation is based on questioning, oftentimes in detriment to the relationship and the well-being of the other person. Questions too often serve as a distraction rather than deepening our understanding of what has already been said. Questions are wonderful tools for information gathering, but they are generally less than effective for communicating genuine understanding. For example, a new client might say, “Sometimes I just feel like giving up on life and driving my car straight into a tree.” If the counselor responds by asking, “Have you been having a lot of trouble with your car?” or “How long have you been driving?” the result is to send the conversation off on a different
track rather than help to deepen understanding of the issue the client has raised. Truly inane or irrelevant questions like these insult your client's intelligence. More valuable questions such as “What kinds of thoughts are you having when you feel like this?” or “What do you suppose this is all about?” result in a deeper exploration of the issue.

This next Reflection Exercise may help you understand the limitations of the use of questions.

**REFLECTION EXERCISE 2.5**

**Observing the Effects of Questions in Interpersonal Communication**

Plan to attend some upcoming social event where you will be able to spend time observing interactions between people, perhaps at a party or a meeting. Your goal is to be a more or less nonparticipating observer, but to avoid drawing negative attention to yourself, participate in conversation as necessary.

During this event, watch and listen to interactions between people, and in particular observe what happens when questions are asked. Note the kinds of questions that seem to be genuinely helpful in furthering the dialogue and those that betray a lack of understanding or a lack of caring.

Expand this kind of observation to other social situations in which you find yourself. Observe interactions between colleagues, friends, and family members, and note the quality of these interactions. Much of the process of becoming an effective counselor has to do with the capacity to observe and learn from your observations. As you hone your observational skills and gain proficiency discerning how good listeners create effective questions, you will gain proficiency as a counselor.

**Exercise Discussion**

The purpose of this exercise is not to make you suspicious of the use of questions, for they serve a valuable purpose, particularly in these initial sessions. Questions are essential tools in helping you learn about your new client and about the reasons she is coming to see you. If your client is in a crisis situation, questions are your best tool for gauging the immediacy and seriousness of risk.

(Continued)
Questions are an invaluable resource for gathering information, but establishing a counseling relationship also requires that you build an emotional climate of trust, respect, and regard with this new client. Counseling is not a mining expedition; it is not about unearthing things in the life of your client. Rather, it is about providing an atmosphere in which your client can feel the freedom to reveal who she is. Counseling is not about doing things to people, which questions can imply, but about doing things with them. You want to find out things about your client and attend to the business of assessing her strengths and problem areas—for which questions are primarily beneficial—but you also want your client to feel understood and supported. Questions can sometimes interfere with communicating that understanding and support.

The Appropriate Use of Questions

Having surveyed some of the problems with the use of questions, let’s review possibilities for their effective use. There is definitely a place for the use of questions in the counselor’s toolbox, and there is no better tool for quickly finding out the facts of a situation. Police detectives have always known this; questions are the staple of criminal investigations.

When used with skill, balance, and experience, questions can elicit information that might be inaccessible, or at least would take longer to clarify, with other skills. When used by a competent counselor, questions do not come off sounding like a crime drama interrogation, and they can be helpful in priming a new client to talk about herself. In addition, most of us have been conditioned to respond to questions, so your new client will most likely expect you to have a few to ask.

Two kinds of questions are reviewed here: those used for fact-finding (closed) and those used for engagement (open-ended). As the names imply, the former are utilized for speedy fact-finding, the latter for more leisurely elaboration and collaboration. Each of these deserves a place in the counselor’s skills repertoire.

Using Fact-Finding (Closed) Questions

Your job may require you to gather certain kinds of information from new clients, or you may have some need to know certain things about them. For this kind of information gathering, fact-finding questions are appropriate. These closed questions are designed to elicit a short, typically factual response. “How old are you?” or “Where do you live?” are typical examples. Using closed questions, you can find out a fair amount of factual, perhaps demographic, information about someone in a relatively short period of time. Fact-finding questions do little to deepen a beginning relationship, however, and may put someone...
off if too many are strung together, sounding like a detective’s interrogation. There is little
evidence to suggest that fact-finding questions promote the therapeutic alliance (Barkham
& Shapiro, 1986).

**Using Engagement (Open-Ended) Questions**

Open-ended questions, used to develop relationship and communicate real interest in the
other, are designed to elicit a broader, more expansive response. These broader engagement
questions often begin with words like “how,” or “what,” or phrases like “What was it like”
(e.g., “to grow up in that kind of family?”) or “What is it that’s so terrible about that physics
class?” These questions, particularly when followed by patient and attentive silence on your
part, invite a longer answer. Research evidence suggests that open-ended questions can be
helpful in assisting clients to explore feelings (Hill et al., 1988), and they are generally more
likely to yield longer, more in-depth client responses than closed, fact-finding questions
(Sternberg et al., 1997).

The following Case Example demonstrates how these different kinds of questions elicit
different types of responses.

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**Case Example 2.1: Using Fact-Finding and Engagement Questions**

In this case, a middle school student has come to her school counselor because of
a difficult classroom situation. The counselor has never met with the student but
quickly ascertains that something is wrong. For the purpose of examining the use
of questions, this counselor will respond only with questions in this interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNSELOR: So what is it that brings you down here today? Can you tell me what’s bothering you?</th>
<th>The counselor begins with an open-ended question, inviting an expansive response. The second question, although technically closed, is also invitational.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STUDENT: Sure. My social studies teacher’s been a real jerk, and the other kids in that class are giving me a hard time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
[The student has stopped talking, but the counselor says nothing.]

The school counselor wisely decides to remain silent and wait for a longer response. Beginning counselors, oftentimes out of anxiety, may not allow for this kind of quiet time.

STUDENT: He always seems to know when I’m not prepared. Then, he calls on me. I know the stuff, mostly, but I get all nervous, and then, I stutter and stuff, and then, the other kids make fun of me. I hate him, and them. I hate them! They’re all a bunch of jerks.

The counselor takes in this information, trying to avoid the temptation to simply use the time the client is talking as an opportunity to come up with new questions. She listens intently and also observes the student’s nonverbal behavior.

COUNSELOR: Can you tell me the specifics about this, maybe about the last time this happened?

This is technically a closed question, because the student could simply answer with a “yes” or a “no,” but the invitation for a longer response is implied.

STUDENT: Well, like yesterday in class I was called on, and I didn’t know the answer. We were supposed to have memorized all the capitals of Latin American countries, and I knew a lot of them, but not all of them. I mean, it’s not like it’s important or anything. I mean, nobody’s going to go to any of those places. So he calls on a couple of kids, and they get them right. But they were candy answers—Mexico, Mexico City. Nicaragua, Managua. Like, duh. Who wouldn’t get those? Then, he looks over at me, and he says, with this really sarcastic voice, “And what about Argentina, Christina? Do you know the capital”?

The counselor is trying to picture this scene, and she begins to get a better sense of how emotionally loaded this situation has been for this student.
So, of course, I drew a blank. I didn’t have a clue. I just sat there. I drew a complete blank. It seemed like it was for about 30 minutes, but it was probably only a couple of minutes. Then, I tried to say something, but I couldn’t get it out. [She starts to cry.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNSELOR: What were the other kids like when this was going on?</th>
<th>Another open-ended, engagement question.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STUDENT: Oh, they were terrible. Really terrible. It was awful. This one girl behind me, Tammy—you know her, I think—she was the worst. She starts making this low mooing noise, like I’m a cow or something. Then, she goes, “Stooopid, stooopid, stooopid Christina. Cry for me Christina,” you know, like that song, “Cry for me, Argentina.” She thought she was so funny. And just because I stutter, and I’m big. You know, she really drags out that word “stupid.” I hate her, I hate her. And all this time, the other kids are cracking up, having a great time. I hate all of them, too. [She’s crying freely now and getting red in the face.]</td>
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| COUNSELOR: What does the teacher do about all of this, especially about what Tammy’s doing? | The counselor is widening the exploration of the situation, again using an engagement question. |

Lots of new questions begin to occur to the counselor, but these are for internal inspection only. For example, “What of the teacher’s role in this?” and “How accurate is this student’s perception of the reality of the situation?” These are for her own assessment of the situation and not meant for discussion with the student.
STUDENT: Who knows? He wouldn’t do anything even if he did know what Tammy was doing. He’s such a creep. He’s worse than they are. He’d probably jump in and start laughing right along with them.

COUNSELOR: Has this kind of thing been happening a lot?

STUDENT: Yeah. At least once a week. It’s getting so I have stomachaches before I come to school. I dread this class. And it’s making me hate school. I mean, I never used to like it, but now I’m really growing to hate it. I get sick in the morning, and I can’t even sleep.

COUNSELOR: How do you suppose I could be helpful with all of this?

STUDENT: I don’t know. But last week my mother told me that she’d heard that you’d be a good person to talk to if anything went wrong at school. She’s worried about my getting sick so much. And I guess you could say things are sure wrong now. But I don’t want her to know about this. She’d get all weird, come down here, and yell at people. I want to deal with this myself. I just thought maybe you could help me. Listen to me, maybe get me out of that class.
Case Discussion

As you see, these kinds of questions, coupled with a judicious use of silence, can elicit significant material in a relatively short period of time. They demonstrate the effectiveness of building on what has already begun to be talked about as opposed to going in a radically new direction. This counselor also avoids the problems associated with asking multiple questions at one time, a beginner’s mistake that can cause confusion for the client.

Because this example exemplifies much of the complexity confronting counselors, spend some time considering the dynamics of this particular student and counselor interaction. Were the questions asked by the counselor effective? What other questions could have been asked? If given the latitude to respond with interventions other than questions, what else could have been said? What are the primary issues on the table here, and how should the counselor begin to think about responding to them? A swirl of ideas about this student and her situation begin to coalesce. The student has mentioned a potentially caustic set of relationships with other students and the teacher, perhaps even bullying and harassment. Should the counselor simply provide support for the student, taking action on her own behalf, or will the counselor need to advocate and act for her? The student has also talked about not being prepared, and we can begin to speculate about reasons for that. Her size may be an issue. Might there be an eating disorder?

Note that the counselor’s questions, while eliciting a great deal of information, did little to provide support or empathy. We will consider other skills later that provide those critical and important ingredients. However, the counselor’s questioning has begun the process of engaging this student in relationship by demonstrating her grasp of the situation and asking about it intelligently. The questioning has also enabled the counselor to get a sense of the scope of the issues at hand and to find out a bit about who this girl is. Thus, the questioning has been a process of both engagement and assessment. The counselor will have some decisions to make about how to proceed once a greater relationship has been established.

Observation of the Use of Questions on the Website: www.sagepub.com/hutchinson3e

You’ve already watched the session titled Cultural Issues in Working With an Adolescent Client. In this session, Anne is serving as Jane’s counselor, trying to find out what’s been happening for Jane at school and also trying to make a connection with this young woman. You might want
to watch this again, but this time paying close attention to the questions Jane asks, perhaps making notes about the effectiveness of each question. Specifically, take note of the following:

1. Were the questions Anne asked primarily of the fact-finding or engagement variety? Give an example or two of each kind that Anne asked.

2. How effective were the questions Anne asked? What might you have done differently?

3. It’s interesting that a primary issue in this counseling session had to do with the client’s discomfort with questions that people in her school were asking her. What was this about, and what implications would this have for the counselor? And how did you think Anne handled this?

Skills Practice Session 2.1: Using Questions

Good questions serve the double role of eliciting information and creating connection between the two of you. Good questions are intelligent and relevant to the task at hand. They don’t ask for unnecessary information. If you are asking a series of questions, they ideally build on each other, following a train of thought, not shifting topics. Take the following example:

*A young mother has come to you because her infant son is very fussy, seems inconsolable, and she’s at her wit’s end about how to deal with this. The child’s continual crying is driving her frantic. This is her first visit with you.*

What questions might you ask her that will help you find out about and clarify her situation, while at the same time showing her that you’re concerned and willing to help her find some relief? Your work setting might have some specific things you need to find out as part of its intake procedures, but beyond that you probably have the latitude to ask questions of your own. Any of the following questions might serve to get things rolling:

*How long has this been going on?*

*What kinds of help and support do you have in dealing with this?*

*Have you had your baby checked out by a doctor, to make sure nothing’s physically wrong?*

*How have you tried to comfort him?*

*Do you have other children?*
All of these questions seem relevant. While some require briefer responses than others, each is an invitation to talk more about this difficult situation.

You will try to avoid asking questions which seem immediately irrelevant, or even foolish:

*What color hair does he have?*

*Have you gotten him any new clothes?*

*Were you an only child?*

With this mom and her crying child, examples of engagement questions might include the following:

*How have you tried to comfort him?*

*What kinds of help and support do you have in dealing with this?*

Each of these questions might allow her to begin to tell her story about her trials and tribulations as a young mom and about the specifics of this difficult situation.

What other kinds of things might you want to know about this woman’s difficult situation, and how could you ask questions to best find out about these? Think of three specific *fact-finding* questions you might pose to her. And what are three *engagement questions* you might ask her?

Here’s another example:

*You are sitting in your school counseling office with a 16-year-old who was caught shoplifting last night. He was released into the custody of his parents who have asked that he come in to see you this morning. He’s a new student in your school, and you’ve met him only briefly on one former occasion.*

What kinds of things might you want to know about this young man and about his situation, and how could you ask questions to best find out about these? First, list three specific *fact-finding* questions you might pose.

Now, try your hand at asking three *engagement questions* of the same student. Write these down.
In later chapters, we explore the counseling skills that are primarily designed to foster and develop relationship, the foundation of any counseling work. The most helpful of these skills, the reflection of content and feeling, is the subject of the next chapter. The use of silence and the simple prompt are introduced here as they are effective supplements when used with questions to begin the process of engaging a new client.

The Use of Silence

New counselors are sometimes reluctant to allow for silence (Gelso & Fretz, 1992). Anxiety can breed a desire to fill every silence, usually with some new question. Some silence is acceptable, even to be nurtured (Leira, 1995). Learn to avoid the temptation to fill the void that silence implies. Oftentimes, there is a great deal happening for your client in that silence, and whatever it is, it may become more apparent if the silence is left untrammeled. Of course, too many silences and exceedingly long silences can provoke great anxiety, for both your client and for you. The trick is in finding the right balance, in knowing when to jump in—and experience is the greatest teacher in perfecting your timing.
As a general guideline, allow for less silence with newer, less counseling-sophisticated clients. They will be the ones most likely to become overly anxious if there is too much silence. Clients whom you know better, particularly those who are experienced in the ways of counseling, can be allowed to sit with somewhat longer silences. And, again, careful observation of the client’s nonverbal behavior in the silent interval can cue you as to its effect.

**The Simple Prompt**

An alternative to silence is the statement that asks for more information without stating the request as a question. There is little need to elaborate much about this particular mode of inquiry, for it truly is simple, yet it can be quite effective. “Tell me more about . . .” or “Let’s explore more of . . .” are examples of such simple prompts, as is the succinct “Hmm. Go on.” A head nod and a smile can be used as nonverbal simple prompts. Sometimes in the counseling literature, simple prompts are referred to as “minimal encouragers” or “acknowledgments” (Stiles, 1978).

Such prompts are effective in that they nudge your client into more discussion of what’s already being talked about. They do not tend to move the client away from the topic already in focus, and they make you sound more confident than the use of a question might.

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**Case Example 2.2: Integrating the Use of Questions, Simple Prompts, and Silence for Effective Engagement**

In this case example, a client has been referred to you by an Employee Assistance Program (a business-sponsored program that links troubled employees to counseling services) because his interpersonal problems with his supervisor and his clients are affecting his job performance. This is the first interview.

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**CLIENT:** OK, here I am. Nice to meet you.

**COUNSELOR:** Good to meet you too. Tell me a bit about what brings you here.

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**CLIENT:** Well, my boss sent me to Employee Assistance, and they sent me here. They said I needed to see you to keep my job.

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*After the greeting, the counselor leads with a simple prompt. No reason not to get right down to business.*

---

*Continued*
COUNSELOR: Hmm.

Another simple prompt. No need to ask any questions yet.

CLIENT: Well, yeah. Jim, my boss, says that I've been losing job time and my work performance is slipping because I can't get along with people [says this sarcastically]. What a joke. Like driving a limo means you have to be some kind of social whiz.

COUNSELOR: Tell me about the specifics of all this, about the difficulties. Then, tell me about your work.

Instead of asking questions, the counselor adopts a more confident tone by utilizing these prompts and sets the stage for a potentially lengthy client description of his work.

CLIENT: Well, let's see, I work for Diplomat Limousine Service. Drive a limo, take lots of hot shots and visiting dignitaries around town. It's a great job, usually. I get to work on my own, take care of this great limo, and drive all over town. It's great except once in a while when a few clients complain, Jim gets on my back.

COUNSELOR: Yeah?

While technically phrased as a question, this is really just a simple prompt, an invitation for the client to elaborate.

CLIENT: You know how bosses can be. He thinks I’m drinking coffee or getting doughnuts when I should be going to pick somebody up. No trust. He thinks I argue too much with clients. He's wrong. I got clients who love me. Like Mrs. Marsh. I been driving her to doctors, hairdresser, whatever, for years. And then last week when some of my clients complained about “my attitude,” he hit the roof.
Case Discussion

This case example shows how a counselor can integrate the use of questions, silence, and simple prompts to quickly engage the client and begin the process of exploration and assessment. Note how the use of the prompts makes the counselor sound more authoritative than if he’d relied solely on questions. The use of prompts instead of questions also implies that the counselor is not operating out of some fixed agenda of things he needs to know about and is open to the client describing his situation as he sees fit. The counselor, in fact, could probably have used no questions at all.

Even with the use of these prompts and silence, little in the way of reflective commentary has occurred that would let the client know he has been heard and
understood. These prompts and silence, in other words, are like questions in that they do little to communicate respect and regard.

Using silence, particularly at the beginning of a counseling relationship, can be tricky. Counselor silence implies that the ball is in the client’s court, but some clients, if new to the ways of counseling or if they have language or cognitive deficits, may not know what to do with the ball in their hands. Too much silence in the beginning can breed significant anxiety. Thus, while you do not want to jump in too quickly, neither do you want silence to drag on to the point where anxiety becomes a hindering factor. Again, experience will help you find this balance.

A fair amount of information has been elicited in this interview with the limo driver client, most of it by simply prompting the client to tell his story. The stage is being set for further exploration as the counselor begins to formulate some ideas about what needs to happen to help this man keep his job—assuming he wants to keep it and is willing to make the accommodations necessary to maintain it—and about what some goals might be for their work together. We could reasonably speculate, even this early in the development of this relationship, about some of the primary issues, as well as this client’s strengths, and how those might lead to the creation of some mutually agreeable counseling goals.

(Continued)

**Lab Practice 2.1: Using Basic Nonverbal and Verbal Skills**

You will now practice, via the Lab Practice Model, the use of engagement and relationship building questions, simple prompts, and appropriate silences in a first interview. Begin the lab practice by determining who will be the first Client, who the first Counselor, who the first Supervisor(s). Decide on the total time you have for this exercise, perhaps an hour, and calculate how much time you’ll have for each interaction, including feedback time. If equipment is available, tape-record your practice counseling sessions.

It is the job of each Client to come up with some issue to talk about. This may or may not be a real issue, but it should not be overly personal or emotionally loaded. It is the job of each Counselor to use questions and simple prompts to draw out and engage the Client.
Assume that this may feel mechanical and forced, particularly as you focus on using questions as a primary means of response. This is unlike usual discourse, and you will be hard-pressed to feel natural, particularly with onlookers watching the interaction. Do what you can to observe your own ability to ask about things that seem to resonate with your Client’s desire to share more information. Let your natural curiosity about this other person and your genuine desire to find out more about her guide you.

After each counseling interaction, take time to discuss the Counselor’s responses and the ways those served to engage the Client. In particular, note those responses that seemed to be really effective, and discuss your ideas about that. Give feedback that is nonjudgmental, in a way that it can be received and utilized. Try to manage the feedback that comes your way with openness to the ideas and input of the Supervisors in your small group. Try on their suggestions that seem to make sense, and discard the ones that don’t seem to fit.

After everyone has had a chance to play all roles, discuss this exercise and your observations of it as a group. Can you make any generalizations about what happened in your small group? Did any particular themes emerge? Are there ideas about the use of questions or about responding to content and feeling?

If you are practicing this set of skills as part of a larger group (i.e., with a number of other small groups in a class), in the large group, discuss how this went. Are there some general observations about the process and about the use of questions in interviewing? Care should be taken to ensure that personal information is not brought back into this larger group discussion. You will most likely see the tremendous potential that intelligent questions have in fact-finding and broad information gathering. Good questions cover lots of territory quickly. Questions and simple prompts are a great way to get things going. Your use of these skills, particularly your ability to ask concise, engaging questions, will improve with practice and feedback (Ivey, Gluckstern, & Ivey, 1993).

Concluding Thoughts:
The Beginnings of an Alliance

It should by now be obvious that the professional counselor’s job is more complicated than simply sitting down and listening to someone. Advanced planning is important, primarily to ensure that not only will people avail themselves of your services but that
you will also get off to the best start possible once you do sit down to talk with someone. Careful attention to the details of the context in which you work—your personal appearance, the setting in which you work, and your supervisory support system—will help to convey to your new client the notion that you are a safe and trustworthy person with whom she or he can work. That planning, coupled with your ideas about what needs to be done in the first meeting, does much to communicate your competency to hear this person’s concerns.

You are now poised to begin to explore why someone has come for counseling as well as to assess the general level of functioning. Your ability to respond intelligently to your client is clearly important to the success of this experience (Tryon, 1985; 2003). Additionally, the more quickly and efficiently you can find out about your client’s concerns and come to agreement with her about what needs to be done, the better the chances are that this first meeting or two will evolve into a successful counseling relationship (Busseri, 2004; Epperson, Bushway, & Warman, 1983; Magee, 1994).

Taken collectively, the use of nonverbal behavior, simple prompts, appropriate silence, and intelligent questions provides the counselor with a good set of tools to begin to work with and engage a new client. You will use these tools as you promote the development of the critical counselor–client relationship, the therapeutic alliance. The importance of this alliance to the overall effectiveness of the counseling experience is difficult to overstate (Havens, 2004; Horvath, 2001; Levy, 2003). Particularly in dealing with people in crisis, it is important to be able to develop this alliance quickly (Thurston, 2003). As a counselor working with a new client, you begin to explore the reasons the person sought counseling, start to form some initial impressions of who this person is, and communicate support and the hope for successful work together.

Starting a new counseling relationship can be scary, particularly for a beginning counselor. It can be even scarier if the new client is resistant and reluctant to be involved. The business of gathering information about this new person and giving out information about yourself and how the process of counseling works, while trying to lay down the foundation of a climate that is empathic and conducive to real communication, can feel overwhelming to someone just starting out. To prepare new counselors for all this, most counseling programs provide skills or pre-practicum, practicum, and internship courses in which you will practice with student colleagues and get started in actual work with a more or less willing clientele. Throughout your training, be patient with yourself, and remember that all of us had to start as beginners. With time, much of this process of initiating counseling relationships will come more easily, and you will feel more comfortable in the role.
1. A lab practice model has been presented in this book that provides a framework to practice specific counseling skills. There are theorists and educators in our field who believe that such a skills-oriented approach misses the mark in that by focusing on specific skills, the counselor may miss the more holistic view of the context of the counseling session. They would argue for looking at the entire interview, not at specific questions or other counselor interventions, and seeing whether the counselor responded adequately to the general themes of the client's issues in a way that seems helpful. What do you think about this? Can you find literature to support your argument? Is there a way to combine these perspectives that makes sense to you?

2. The study of nonverbal behavior in counseling relationships is a fascinating aspect of this work. There are some interesting readings about this area of counseling thought that you might consider as you contemplate closer examination of your client's nonverbal behavior, as well as your own. Included in these are the works of Alexander Lowen (1958), Wilhelm Reich (1949; a controversial figure, a brilliant observer of nonverbal behavior), E. Smith (1985), and Milton Erickson (1989).

3. Find advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, or in other sources that market counseling services. Discuss the relative merits of these. Also, look at advertising for other professional fields and discuss the merits. Are there things that counseling field practitioners could learn and borrow from these other professions? Are there advertising strategies that other professions use that counselors should avoid?

4. Identify counselors in your area who work in different kinds of settings and have different professional affiliations. Visit them in their offices and ask about the positive aspects of their office settings and about the drawbacks of their offices. What is your personal impression of the spaces in which they work?

5. Call five counselors in your area and ask them how they are supervised. Interview them about the professional training, theoretical orientation, and personal style of their supervisors. Which of these supervisor descriptions most appeal to you?

6. Investigate the literature related to the impact of counselor attire on client outcomes. What implications do you see this having for your working attire?

7. In the counseling session you watched on the website (Cultural Issues in Counseling With an Adolescent Client), the counselor uses a number of simple prompts in the first few minutes of the session. How effective do you think these were? Could these prompts—which were technically posed as questions—have been made into statements? How might you have handled this differently?
REFERENCES


