

What is counselling?

by Gill Jackman

Like many of the complementary medicines today 'counselling' is a much used term that people know very little about. For the British, particularly, the idea of acknowledging difficulties is still a problem.

As with many taboo subjects, Princess Diana blazed a trail for counselling by acknowledging how helpful it could be to talk about feelings and their causes, eventually coming to see that it was her own wounds from an unhappy childhood that when worked through, gave her the compassion to set up and fight for her charities so effectively.

So what does counselling do?

Counselling involves the client doing most of the talking, but a skilled counsellor will provide the space and encouragement to talk through even those things we find difficult to acknowledge to ourselves:

- ❖ *How deep a loss bereavement brings*
- ❖ *How difficult a marriage and bringing up children can be*
- ❖ *How hard it is to put our foot down*

Inside us we have the resources and, where appropriate, the solutions to deal with all of this but have often forgotten, or never really learned, how to find them.

Your counsellor should provide absolute confidentiality (within the ethical guidelines of the BACP or UKCP), insight into how events we have forgotten may have affected us and the ability to untangle confusion so that present choices and feelings are clearer.

The knock on effect in our own lives and for those closest to us can be a pleasant surprise.

Deeper In

Some people like to know more about the process or the background of counselling. If you are thinking of having counselling, there is no need to read on, but for those who are interested, I include more information.

Counselling is not psychiatry.

Counselling is not psychology.

How do they differ?

Psychologists and psychiatrists make diagnoses about a patient's problem, but counsellors put their own views in the background and are mainly concerned with helping the client find their *own* words or their *own* expression, for their experience.

For counsellors, the client and the client's feelings and perceptions are the main thing.

How it works

This is my particular view, in my words, about how counselling works.

It works on lots of levels at once, some of which we don't see clearly, or the benefit of, until it's over. Counselling should:

- ❖ *Enable you to feel safe enough to face your fears and move through them*
- ❖ *Teach you that emotional pain is something you can survive*
- ❖ *Allow you to be the person inside who you thought you'd grown out of and who needs to be heard*
- ❖ *Give you the opportunity to review the way in which you think about things*
- ❖ *Give you the opportunity to test out new ways of thinking without having to be definitive*
- ❖ *Give you the chance to see and to be who you are*

To get the most from counselling you have to tell the truth - particularly if that means telling the truth about the difficulties of telling the truth!

The birth and history of psychology in the 20th Century: what counselling grew out of

Counselling as an offshoot of social science is a very 20th century thing. In the beginning was **Freud**. He was a psychoanalyst who believed that problems could all be traced to childhood trauma, talked about on the couch, and healed by remembering them.

What **Freud** gave us was the idea of the unconscious. Before him this idea wasn't around at all, but afterwards there was the idea that there was something going on we didn't know about, and if only we could uncover it, this would be like finding a key to a locked door.

This central idea has a lot to answer for. By no means is this rigid view still held by counsellors today. Although people often have feelings that they consider unacceptable and even forget, and although they might need to contact them, this is not the whole story. Nor should it be the whole focus. **Freud** was alive a long time ago, and much has been added to what he said. **Pavlov** was a psychologist who discovered that if you kept dogs in a cage and rung a bell every time you fed them, after a while they would salivate when you rang the bell even if you didn't feed them. This led eventually to the idea that if only you provided the right rewards, people would associate the rewards with good *behaviour*. Therefore you could condition people to behave appropriately. We all do it with children, but unlike **Skinner** (a pioneer in this field) most of us think there's a bit more to human beings than just a stimulus, a response and people's *behaviour*.

Cognitive psychology is about how people *think*, and how their thinking develops. In actual fact, thinking can be controlled in the same way as behaviour. NLP is about examining how we *think* and reprogramming the brain by affirming new ways forward, but is glossily marketed, so it looks very new and dynamic. In fact *Cognitive counselling* has been doing this for years and focuses via the same means, on becoming aware of negative ways of thinking and changing them into something more helpful.

As you may sense, *cognitive* and *behavioural* schools of thought had nothing to do with the more psyche focused work of people like **Winnicott** or **Bowlby** or **Klein**. The former were much more working with the seen and measurable, whereas the others were heavyweight, early trauma, templates

of the world merchants. They worked with babies and needs, love and deep, deep hatred, fantasy and how we define the world when emotions become intolerable. **Klein** in particular, focused on the way we split the world and parts of ourselves into good and bad; the way in which a patient might *project* the hatred of self onto the counsellor/therapist.

So—we see many theories about how people work—most of which, in my experience, have something useful to say if you don't swallow them whole as gospel. And then—in the 1940s along came a man who took a unique approach. His name was **Carl Rogers**. He was a scientist and he discovered, in a scientifically verifiable way, that if you provided empathy, unconditional acceptance and congruence (remaining true to yourself) to people who could connect with you, they felt a great deal better about themselves in a consistent way.

Carl Rogers didn't claim to know about people's inner workings or have great theories of the unconscious. He just found that having a contract with people and working consistently in a certain way with them worked. Thus **Carl Rogers** became the founding father of *person-centred counselling*.

Perhaps it was really then that the human potential movement started. Certainly a great deal of radical experimental psychology went on from the 60's onward: communities, encounter groups, the transpersonal, cults.

Fritz Perles developed Gestalt therapy and discovered that the 'whole was larger than the sum of it's parts', and that the whole picture was needed to make sense of things or complete them

Robert Assagioli developed *Psychosynthesis*, which gave us all the opportunity to look at and converse with the many subpersonalities who live in us. He developed guided visualisation where answers to questions or healing experiences can be sought within the depths of the active imagination. He also acknowledged the reality of the transpersonal sphere and worked with this.

From the 70s counselling exploded into as many directions as a Roman candle and some people standing in the way became quite burnt. I would recommend you check a counsellors qualifications and training, take your time choosing and consider what questions you would like the answer to ready for your first meeting.

A deeper look at counselling theory, practice and how to use this in your life can be found in my book *Create Your Own Reality (Self-help for the Blue Peter Generation)*, ISBN 978-1905166008, which is widely available.