The Counseling Process

The Professional Counselor
■ One of the most significant factors affecting the lives of clients is the makeup of the professional counselor.
■ The professional counselor recognizes the need to shape academic training and skills into a fine instrument.

The Active Placebo
■ The active placebo concept refers to the fact that counselor and client expectations play a large role in the helping process, as large as the actual theories and techniques used in the helping process.

■ There are four things that assist professional counselors in their attempt to intervene in the lives of clients, all of which are present in interactions with the public:
■ Dress
■ Manner
■ Setting
■ Style of helping

■ The active placebo is at work during every moment of counselors’ professional lives.

■ It should shape the way in which you conduct your practice, the way in which you are seen by the public, and the manner by which you approach clients and their counseling needs, as well as the way in which you establish your counseling environment

Counselor Characteristics
■ Counselor characteristics refer to the personality and the approach of the counselor.
■ Essential counselor characteristics (Kottler, 2003):
■ Vibrant
■ Inspirational
■ Charismatic
■ Sincere
■ Loving
■ Nurturing
■ Wise
■ Confident
■ Self-disciplined

Cross Cultural Counselor Competence
■ Every counseling interaction is cross cultural in nature: Two (or more) unique individuals enter into the counseling relationship with their own cultural perspectives and experience.

■ Murphy and Dillon (2008) suggest three guidelines for multicultural best-practice based on their understanding of the multicultural literature:
  "As clinicians, we need to be aware of our own ethnicity, gender, and cultural heritage.
  "We need to acquire knowledge about the cultures and customs of the clients with whom we work."
Finally, we need to use this self-awareness and knowledge to devise flexible strategies for intervention that are effective and congruent with our client’s values.

**Basic Counseling Paradigm**
- A basic counseling paradigm is the manner by which we can understand the human condition in all of its various forms.

- It is important that as a counselor, you formalize your thoughts on the nature of change.
- What causes client problems and how are people best helped?

**The Helping Relationship**
- People with serious mental health issues can be assisted through the power of relationships.

- In the healing process, clients seek to feel joined with and part of the world around them.

**The Art of Helping**
- The art of helping others comes from our ability to be in touch with our passion and desire to be in a relationship with another human being.

- The art of helping others lies within our ability to form a relationship with another human being because we have made a commitment to self, an examination of personal motives for wanting to help others, and a realization that the helping process involves being present and attentive to clients through a variety of clinical approaches and techniques.

**Helping as a Science**
- All professional counselors, regardless of specialty area, should use scientific methodology to make practice-based decisions.

- The science of counseling means that we make treatment decisions that are informed by research and best practices.

- The outcome data provided by researchers serves as a launching pad for effective interventions and assists us in avoiding methods and techniques that do not facilitate the counseling process.

**What Brings Clients to Counseling?**
- Life and the inability to cope with life is the driving force for someone to seek counseling.

- Once clients’ temporary fixes fail and their inability to cope becomes apparent, they make a decision on whether or not they will call or ask for a referral for counseling.

- Although counseling is a necessary service and is generally supported by the community, many potential clients still feel a sense of shame or weakness when thinking of coming to a professional counselor.
Many people see appointments and intake requirements as an additional hardship that they may be better off not incorporating into their hectic lives.

To further increase your empathy, consider the following questions:
- Could you give up two and a half hours each week for 15 weeks? (Counseling is more than the 50 minute session, you must travel there and back, fill out paperwork, see additional people, etc.).
- If you were to see a professional counselor, would you have to miss work?
- Would you have to attempt to move your schedule around?
- Would you have to worry about people knowing where you are going?
- If you are a graduate student going to school at night and have family responsibilities, who would take care of those issues while you were going to your counseling appointments?

**Initiating Counseling**
- Initiating counseling sets the tone for the working relationship between the client and the professional counselor.

- **During the initial stage**, counselors:
  - Make a personal connection with the client
  - Define the process of counseling
  - Make a plan for working together
  - Create a climate of change

**The Counseling Environment**
- The **counseling environment** refers to the combination of external physical conditions and counselor characteristics that affect the growth and development of clients.

- Professional counselors are responsible for creating an accepting environment, both physically and interpersonally, that is as free from anxiety and distractions as possible.

**The Helping Relationship**
- In order to successfully engage clients in the helping relationship, we have to make it safe for clients to tell us things they normally would not tell another person.

- Clients disclose personal and private information to professional counselors as a necessary part of the process.

- That disclosure, in a non-reciprocal relationship, sometimes violates all of the relationship rules clients have established in their other relationships.

- The client and counselor should address three main questions:
  - What is going on?
  - What do I want instead
  - How might I get to what I want?

- As the client approaches the presenting problem, the counselor uses **empathy** and **active listening** skills to facilitate the story.
- The counselor may participate in **collaborative brainstorming** or serve as a challenger to test the possibilities available to the client.

- Once the client settles on a direction of action, the counselor’s role is to help the client develop a **plan of action**.

**The Counselor as Healer**
- The personality of the professional counselor is as important to the healing process as almost any other component.

- As much as 30 percent of therapeutic outcome is associated with the interpersonal relationship between the professional counselor and the client.

**Empathy**
- Within counseling theory, the concept of empathy is always present.

- **Empathy** has been defined as both a trait and a state.

- People have the ability to experience empathy as a trait, that is, to place ourselves in the shoes of another and take on that person’s worldview or perspective.

- In addition, we have the ability to convey empathy behaviorally through our words and nonverbal behaviors. This state allows others to understand that we are experiencing them, that we see their perspective.

**The Structure of Counseling**
- **Structure** provides both clients and professional counselors a framework within which the practice of counseling will occur.

- Some elements common to providing clients with the structure and expectations of counseling include:
  - Informed consent, including fee arrangements
  - Frequency and duration of sessions
  - What the process will actually look like

**Informed Consent**
- Professional counselors are ethically bound to provide clients with **informed consent**.

- Informed consent occurs in the first session and as frequently as necessary thereafter to ensure that clients are aware of and understand their rights and responsibilities within the counseling relationship.

- Another topic to be covered in informed consent is the **fee** charged by the professional counselor for services including when payment is expected and whether or not the counselor files the client’s insurance.

**Frequency and Duration of Sessions**
- A crucial element to the business of counseling is the frequency and duration of sessions. These issues are best addressed at the beginning of the counseling process.
- Most individual sessions last 50-60 minutes
- Group sessions are frequently 90 minutes in length
- Will you meet weekly?
- How will appointments be scheduled?

**Information Gathering**
- Most professional counselors employ some form of an intake or psychosocial history in the initial session.

- An **intake** is simply a means of obtaining comprehensive information about a new client.

- An intake normally involves gathering the following information:
  - Client contact information
  - Basic demographic information
  - A general overview of why the client is seeking services at this time
  - A description of the history of the presenting concern
  - Family background
  - Any abuse history
  - Medical history
  - Level of education
  - Present and past occupational status

- Professional counselors include their impressions and recommendations at the conclusion of the intake.

**Exploring and Working Together**
- The real relationship is the overt, explicit, relationship between the client and counselor. It includes what is clear, known, and unequivocal about the dynamic between the parties.

- The real relationship is influenced by many additional factors including transference, counter transference, and the working alliance.

- **Transference** occurs when a client’s emotions from a previous experience are projected, displaced, or *transferred*, onto the counselor and the counseling relationship.

- **Countertransference** occurs when the projection of beliefs, emotions, or experience is from the counselor to the client.

- The **working alliance** is essentially a collaborative environment in which the client and counselor can work and transcends across theoretical orientations. It relies heavily on the interpersonal skills of the counselor.

**Goal Setting**
- Treatment goals need to be specific enough to provide a measure of change that both the professional counselor and client can identify, evaluate, and alter as needed.
Continued assessment is critical to understanding where the client is in the change process.

When a goal is reached and change is noted, it should be celebrated within the client-counselor relationship because a primary responsibility within the counseling relationship is to assess the efficacy of treatment and note any positive counseling outcomes (PCO).

Treatment Efficacy

Treatment efficacy is an issue of truly understanding the maladaptive nature of the human condition and applying theories and techniques to help clients re-engage their lives in an adaptive way.

Positive Counseling Outcomes

Positive counseling outcomes (PCO) is related to treatment efficacy but is not always a result of sound treatment approaches.

PCO usually encompasses the following:
- Clients leave the counseling relationship better able to address the issues that brought them into counseling
- Clients have gained increased insight into their life and the ways that their life provokes adaptive or maladaptive coping abilities
- Clients have developed a plan (written or verbal) that involves their knowledge of their cues for relapse
- Treatment goals are achieved

When Change Doesn’t Happen

The best counseling plans, like the best professional counselors, do not always result in a client’s goals being accomplished.

Successful counseling is grounded in capitalizing on opportunity, the relational competence of both client and professional counselor, and initiative (i.e., the expectation and desire to change).

Opportunity is compromised when clients fail to attend or are chronically late for regularly scheduled appointments.

Relational competence is a two way street: The most proficiently skilled counselors may not be able to reach clients with whom they cannot seem to relate.

Initiative is also referred to, conversely, as resistance.

No matter how desirous the client is of help and change, the risk inherent in the process taps their most human defense mechanisms.

Resistance is to be expected but may also be culture-bound
Signs of resistance include: being late for, canceling, or missing appointments to avoid the work that constitutes counseling, as well as being less verbal in counseling sessions.

Some professional counselor behaviors actually increase client resistance. For example: giving advice, solving problems prematurely, and relying on questions as the basis of the relationship may be well-intended on the part of the professional counselor but destructive to the therapeutic relationship.

Integration and Termination
- The ultimate goal of counseling is for professional counselors to work themselves out of their jobs with their clients.

Professional counselors work with each client to facilitate new learning that is applied and integrated into the client’s daily functioning.

When that occurs, a natural point of termination in the client-counselor relationship presents itself.

Termination Anxiety
- Client termination anxiety may present in several ways. Clients may:
  - Develop new and significant problems as they anticipate the end of the relationship
  - Regress into old patterns of dysfunctional behavior that require continued counseling intervention
  - Experience real sadness or grief around the loss of their relationship with you as a person

Effective Termination
- Professional counselors can take several steps to facilitate termination in the most helpful manner possible:
  - Attending to the client’s needs and establishing clear follow up appointments
  - Reviewing the progress in counseling with a focus on the progress made
  - Celebrating the successes and changes as a result of counseling
  - Considering what might lead to a return to counseling, and how the client can go about doing so

Becoming a Counselor
- As a professional counselor, you will grow in your treatment efficacy as you recognize that your own ability to address any of your personal unresolved life events aids in your ability to help others.

  - You will hopefully exude a sense of humor, be flexible, and participate in ongoing supervision and wellness efforts.

  - You will observe your comfort with strong emotion and develop a sense of ease when faced with the distress of others.
Another self-check in the discernment process will be your ability to develop, create openness with, and have capacity for intimate relationships.