

An introduction to counselling



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It may have been that evening when John called round to talk about something quite different... or the time when Alan was being given a lift home after the Group meeting... or when Pat dropped behind on the hike to chat.

'I don't seem able to persuade the Executive to get started on organising next years expedition...'

'I have had another row at home. I think it's about time I moved out...'

'My husband says I'll have to give up Cubs...'

Many Leaders will readily identify situations like these in which similar statements or questions have been put. Sometimes they will have been made directly, perhaps introduced by a phrase such as 'By the way...' or 'Can I have a word about...'. At other times the issues will have been raised indirectly or obliquely - indeed, the first question asked may not have been the real issue at all. It may have come informally from an individual, face to face or in a group.

Such impromptu moments are a real opportunity for the Leaders. How they react, what they say, and their attitude determine whether or not they will be of real help to John, Alan, or Pat.

Who will help?

We all need help, young and old, men and women, successful and unsuccessful - help to build relationships, to explore and understand issues, to make choices, to decide on action - and to live with the consequences.

Children are given a circle of people who can help... parents, relatives, teachers: adults choose a circle of close friends and use it except when they need specialist help, perhaps from a doctor or lawyer. The adult chosen to help will usually be someone who has been found to be genuinely interested in them as people, friendly and easily available, a careful listener and someone believed to be actually helpful in practice.

Help - through advice?

Some adults consider that they have a responsibility to be direct and give advice - 'What you ought to do is...' They believe that from their experience of life or their ability to see issues clearly they are in a good position to make judgements and pass them on - 'if I were you, I would...'

There may be situations when there is little alternative to this approach (for example, in a crisis or emergency or when the other person is so obviously incapable of thinking things through because he or she is so upset).

However, situations like this are rare. In general, adopting a position which says or implies - 'if I were in your shoes, I would...' presents many

difficulties. We are not in their shoes, there may be hidden personal factors which they have not revealed. We cannot be sure of all the feelings and issues involved. Advice is always second-hand and as a result may be unsatisfactory or indeed wrong. Even if it is sound the other person will not feel motivated to act upon it because they have not worked it out for themselves.

Advice and opinion from several sources (colleagues, friends, employers) may lead to comparing the value of different opinions of people rather than considering the advantages of different courses of action.

When receiving advice individuals are being stopped from solving the problem for themselves and indeed encouraged to develop a dependent attitude, and perhaps even come to rely on the adviser. In short, advice-giving will not help people become mature and responsible, capable of working out realistic decisions for themselves.

Another way - through counselling?

An alternative way is to avoid imposing solutions or giving ready-made answers, but instead to help the other person to look at the situation from every point of view, to understand their own feelings, to weigh up alternatives, and to make their own judgement about the action to be taken. Helping a person to look at situations fully and honestly, to think them through and to make their own decisions is known as 'counselling'.

The word 'counselling' is used in a variety of senses, but the principles involved are generally the same. The ideas which follow are an introduction to the topic and an outline of some of these principles.

We are not thinking here of helping people who may have severe problems or personality disorders and thus need specialist help, but rather as a kind of 'personal first-aid'. People sometimes need the comfort of a good listener and a chance

to sort out their ideas in the presence of an emotionally uninvolved adult. We can be that adult, by providing time, space and an uncluttered mind.

When to counsel?

There may be two main types of situation:

The other person is confused... John does not know what to do, he is worried, undecided. He does not have the facts or he cannot interpret the facts he has. He is uncertain about the different things he might do.

Jenny has made a snap decision... about an issue. When she is worried, angry or confused she is likely to make a hasty decision. She does not consider alternative things she might do. She fails to consider the consequences of her plan or actions and she jumps to conclusions.

You may be asked directly for help or you may feel that it is necessary. Create the climate for this to happen by being available, approachable and by observing clues, such as sudden changes in a person's attitudes, moods or behaviour.

Where to counsel?

The kind of 'first-aid' counselling being described here does not involve discreetly lit rooms with couches and a psychological approach! It is just as likely to occur on a hike or in a corner of your headquarters; nor do people always make an appointment for a session! Equally, many Leaders respond intuitively and counsel successfully without fully appreciating that they are doing so.

If it is an individual matter, get the person aside to a place where your conversation will not be overheard or interrupted. Try to make them feel at ease and relaxed.

Obviously each person is different; some people will be quick to talk about their problems, some will be strong in their statements; some will be straightforward and come to the point at once; others may wander around the issue. Each problem and each Leader will also be different. This makes counselling hard to do, something which cannot be done 'by numbers'. The principles which follow are general guidelines but they must be adapted to the person, the situation and yourself.

Some principles of counselling

Listen

It sounds easy but it is often hard for most of us to put into practice.

Think of your own experience - you have probably talked to someone and had the feeling that they listened to you and understood what you were trying to say. On the other hand, you have probably talked to someone who gave you the feeling that they did not really hear what you were talking about or didn't understand you. You probably left feeling rather resentful.

What are the things a person does which makes it hard to talk? Perhaps they were busy or not interested, and let you know by shuffling their papers or talking to somebody else at the same time. Perhaps they told you how to run your life or made sarcastic comments about what you said or told you your problems were not very important and that all you ought to do was 'grow up' They interrupted all the time to give advice or cross-examine you or perhaps the meaning of what you were trying to say was twisted. It was clear that they just did not understand.

So, to avoid this, listen. Give an individual your undivided attention when they come to talk to you.

Let them know you are willing to take the time to hear them out.

Keep asking yourself -'Do I understand what they are trying to say? You will often discover that you do not understand completely, or will not be sure. In this case, you should make it possible for them to continue to talk and for you to listen.

Avoid giving advice

They will probably ask for advice and you might be tempted to supply it. The only thing is, the advice you give is quite likely to be wrong or unsatisfactory for them, no matter how good it sounds to you. In the long term people will be helped best by being encouraged to think things through rather than having answers pushed at them.

Summarise the problem

You may want to do this several times while talking. You will be most effective if you summarise in your own words to make sure you understand. This also helps them to check on what they are telling you.

Give any necessary Information

Sometimes a decision cannot be reached because the person concerned does not have all the facts - for example, the resources that are available such as other Leaders, or agencies. Find out if information is needed and give it if you can. Make sure that it is balanced and accurate and that it is information and not advice.

Encourage to think of different approaches

Ask if there are other solutions. Most of us when we are faced with some kind of issue that is important to us have trouble in thinking. We become confused. We settle on one approach

and cannot come up with any others. Encourage the person to think; you may be able to suggest some other approaches, bearing in mind it is not your decision on which to use. By looking at several different ways of solving the problem they may not feel so trapped.

Some possible responses in counselling

Using these principles as a base line, let us now consider the kind of responses and reactions which can be made and to put them into practice. The suggestions given below are only guidelines, and you will have to use them in your own way. You cannot memorise any words to say which will fit into any situation, and you cannot be given words which will fit your way of talking and doing things. Nor is there a magic sequence or phrases guaranteed to produce success. Counselling is a relationship, not a formula.

Restate

Restate briefly the person's words in your own way. 'If I understand you correctly you propose doing this activity but the rest of the group do not agree'.

Mention and accept feelings

When someone comes with a problem or complaint they are likely to have some strong feelings about the matter. It does not do any good to tell them they should not feel a certain way. They do, and you cannot do away with feelings by pretending that they are not there.

Nor can you order them out of existence. Being able to express one's feelings is of itself a great help, even if a solution to the problem is not found. Accept the person's feelings. You can often help greatly if you let them know that you understand why they feel the way they do. You can show acceptance of the person without agreeing with or condoning actions. You may say

'-I suppose you must be pretty annoyed' or 'I guess you were rather upset about that'.

You may also believe that they are feeling one way when in fact they are feeling something completely different: they may not be angry but confused, they may feel left out rather than got at...

Show you are listening

We are trying to listen with understanding. Nobody likes to talk to a blank wall; we all need to know that the other person is paying attention to us. For that reason you should indicate every so often that you are listening and that you understand. How you do this is up to you and you should do whatever comes naturally to you. It might be a simple phrase like 'I understand' or a word like 'Yes'. A nod of the head or a hand gesture might do just as well. Silence can also be very effective; sometimes just sitting and waiting while the person thinks can be the best thing to do.

Encourage to talk on

What you say depends on you, the other person and the situation, but it might include phrases like 'Tell me about it' or 'Go ahead' or even 'Uh huh'.

Ask questions which are open-ended

Counselling is not interrogation, so avoid too many questions, but you might want to ask what they did or how they felt; perhaps 'And then what happened?' or 'How did you feel about that?' or 'What was the difficulty tonight?' Questions of this kind help the individual to talk without giving the idea that you are cross-examining them.

Some Important notes of caution

Of course, there will be times when in spite of your discussion the person will still be discouraged. The confused person will still be confused; the hasty person will still be hasty. Not all problems are capable of solution. No matter how skilled you are, you won't be able to help solve all the issues that are brought to you.

Do not try to overreach yourself

When you find yourself at a loss, **see** that the person gets other help. Admit when you are out of your depth, and ask whether they would like you to try to find someone else who may be able to help. Scouting and the wider community have a lot of resources; at the same time you must respect any confidence.

Counselling carries responsibilities

Try to understand your own feelings about situations. These might include, sometimes, the pain of knowing and not being able to tell, or the frustration of believing that, in spite of all your endeavours, someone is embarking upon a course of action without realising its full implications.

Counselling involves commitment to people

Counselling can be difficult even if rewarding. Control your own emotional involvement. Be cautious of the 'glamour' which may appear to surround 'one-to-one' situations. By working effectively with small groups of members, individual crises may be avoided.

Preparing to counsel

The primary tasks of the counsellor are to:

- provide immediate personal support
- help the individual to clarify the issues
- make way for further help if necessary.

Each of these tasks can be helped by thinking them through in advance so that when you find yourself unexpectedly 'counselling on your feet' you are prepared.

Think through your own views and feelings on different topics which may be of concern to others. Try to list some specific issues which may be raised, and the kind of questions which Leaders might ask. How would you respond, what further information might you need, and where might you find it locally?

Counselling by itself is not all of leadership - but it is one of the most useful of the repertoire of skills which Leaders could have. There is no substitute for a warm hearted, genuine desire to help, but the skill to be really helpful in practice can be developed in training and from learning by experience.

Some ideas and principles can be learned from books and courses, but the art of counselling is only acquired through practice. Opportunities cannot be manufactured to order, but when they occur they require self-discipline, patience and a concern to apply the principles and to evaluate consequences.

These introductory ideas on 'first aid' counselling can be used in the impromptu situation thrown up continuously in the life of any group. A Leader who accepts and likes others and is sensitive to them as individuals, will provide invaluable help by working in this non-directive way.