

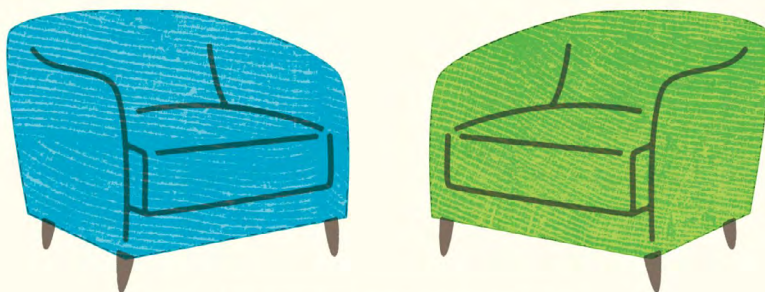
SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE COUNSELING

A FAITH-BASED
INTEGRATION

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2nd Edition



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Skills for Effective Counseling* by Heather Davediuk Gingrich, Elisabeth Nesbit Wagner, and Fred C. Gingrich.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.



InterVarsity Press

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THE MICROSILLS APPROACH

*Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be
mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

JAMES 1:4

CHAPTER FOCUS

SKILL: the skill of learning new skills and identifying targeted skill areas as they relate to the phases of the counseling process

PURPOSE: to discuss the goals of counseling, the roles of counselor and counselee, the language of microsills, the process of acquiring new skills, and the targeted skill areas of the various phases of the counseling process

FORMULA: I learn new skills best by _____. The phases of the counseling process are characterized by the following target areas: _____.

HAVE YOU READ THE INTRODUCTION?

If you have not read the introduction preceding this chapter, we suggest you do so before diving into this chapter. It will explain why we have chosen to use particular vocabulary in this book, the specific audiences we are considering, and how the book is organized. This chapter will make more sense if you have read the introduction.

A COUNSELING STORY

We will begin this chapter with an extended case description. One of the ways people learn new skills is by reading stories about how others have succeeded, or not, in developing important lessons along their journey. So I (Fred) would like to introduce you to Tommy. As you read this, notice the almost counterintuitive counseling responses. Counseling is a particular form of communication in which a different kind of conversation occurs.



From the initial phone call, red flags were popping up all over the place. Tommy had previously seen several counselors, and while he now lived in a different town and could not go back to see any of them, I could not help but wonder what I could offer him that the others hadn't. Not only that, but Tommy was a teacher at the same school my son attended. There would be times that our paths would cross at the school, which could be awkward, a situation I would rather avoid if I could. At least Tommy was not my son's teacher; that would have been a role conflict that would be considered unethical for a professional counselor. I still did not like the situation, but our community was small, so there was no one I could refer Tommy to. I decided to meet with Tommy.

Tommy was amiable, actually a big teddy-bear type. At the beginning of our first session jokes and sports trivia rolled off his tongue, not something that I gravitated to, and this was a bit of a concern as we entered into what is typically a more serious level of conversation. This lack of serious focus was another red flag. Was Tommy going to be able to engage the counseling process?

In an attempt to steer him in a fruitful direction, I gently prodded Tommy to share his story. The theme was a common enough rendition of an adolescent boy becoming a man, with sports and sex dominating his passions. His previous counseling addressed his search for genuine relationships with women and with men. He had married young, but he and his wife were not particularly close. Their family life was dominated by their three kids. He got together with guys from work to watch sports when he could. He and his family were connected to a church, but they were not involved. The pattern of superficiality in his relationships was clear all the way from his family of origin to his current life circumstances.

His previous counselors, some professional, some pastoral, had been good experiences for Tommy, but all had been short-lived—two to ten sessions and irregular, and they simply had repeated the pattern of superficiality. The counselors had tried a variety of things with Tommy. A college discipler had walked with Tommy through a book on sexual purity and the dangers of pornography. One counselor had used a cognitive-behavioral approach, delving into Tommy's assumptions about his life and challenging his irrational beliefs. A pastor had begun a structured series of Bible studies on intimacy with God. Another counselor had worked on Tommy's distanced relationships with his family of origin. Another pastoral counselor had confronted him with his deficits in being a Christian husband and father and his deficiencies in leading his family.

All of these approaches made sense to me and had proven somewhat helpful to Tommy. But they had ultimately not produced any long-lasting, core change. Outside the session, I prayed for God's direction for Tommy's and my times together. I was not convinced that pursuing an approach similar to any that prior helpers had used was going to be helpful. I sensed that Tommy would compliantly



jump through any hoops that I would set out for him. I figured that he wanted to please others and that he was invested in appearing as though he was working hard. So I expected he would diligently do homework assignments. While on the surface this made him a people helper's dream, I knew that real change would involve something different.

So I resisted the urge to suggest to Tommy that he think, feel, or do anything. I became much less directive than was my normal tendency. I was trained in the skills that form the core of this book, and I believed they were helpful. I had instructors and supervisors who had affirmed these as good foundational skills, but they suggested that if you wanted to see deep change in your counselees, you needed to offer more. I believed them. But Tommy had been given the *more* in various forms, and he was struggling with the same issues and themes that had dominated his adolescence and young adulthood. Feeling as though I was being merely a good listener but not much of a counselor, I entered each conversation with Tommy with a commitment to not do what the others had done; instead, I was committed to simply *being with* Tommy, following his lead with regard to topic and pace, offering no homework, not directing his reflections or actions.

Still, my low-level anxiety and my questioning of my competence persisted. I consulted with another counselor about Tommy's case. I regularly checked in with Tommy regarding how he was responding to and feeling about the counseling. I prayed about it. But each session I felt the urging to not direct, suggest, or prescribe anything. I used the skills of this book over and over.

We ended counseling one and a half years later (about forty-five sessions). Tommy had decided to take another teaching position in another state—interestingly, in the city where his mother and sister lived, because he had decided he wanted to live closer to extended family. His wife was fully supportive of the move, and Tommy was excited about this new chapter in his own life and marriage.

I met Tommy five years later through a random set of circumstances. We immediately moved beyond the superficial to his spontaneous expression of gratitude for our sessions together. He knew exactly how to express his current situation: "I'm different now. My wife and I connect much more deeply. She sometimes even watches sports with me. I have a relationship with each of my kids. My mom died last year, but we were a family as we grieved. I'm so grateful that I have this chance to thank you for not pushing or pressuring me. I don't know how you knew what I needed, but you got it right. Every other counselor had told me in one way or another that I needed to change. I knew I needed to change, but somehow the homework assignments I completed to make me feel like I was doing something weren't of lasting benefit. I can't really describe what you did to help, but I'm so grateful."



The Goals of Counseling Are to:

- > collaboratively set short- and long-term goals
- > facilitate the next step of growth
- > focus on the counselee's needs
- > foster counselee strengths

The Goals Are Not to:

- > give advice
- > fix things
- > convince
- > help counsees feel better or happier

Most of the time, we do not have the benefit of this kind of long-term feedback. Particularly in this case, it was wonderful to receive the affirmation that my instincts or spiritual attunement had been correct. I am grateful to Tommy for the reminder that the skills we are describing in this book are not just foundational or preliminary; they are central to the change process. The research on common factors in counseling theory affirms that however you conceptualize the change process, these skills are at the center. Not everyone has the patience to learn them well. Not all counsees have the persistence to spend forty-five sessions with a counselor, and some counselors seldom see counsees for such an extended period of time, even if they want to. But our belief is that the skills of this book will serve you and your counsees well.

We prefer an approach to counseling that is strengths based rather than focused on psychopathology. A psychopathology approach is based in the medical model of diagnosing disease and focuses on the deficits or problems presented within the counselee. While counselee needs and problems bring them to counseling, it is their God-given strengths, abilities, and capacity to heal that will move them forward. This means that throughout counseling we seek to identify and build on the tools, resources, skills, and abilities that the counselee already brings to the process rather than primarily focus on what is lacking. While deficits or areas that could use further development are not ignored, they are not the foundation on which counseling builds. This was the situation with Tommy. Previous counselors had focused primarily on Tommy's deficits, which had only made him more resistant to change. Switching the focus to listening carefully to Tommy's perspective on what was happening and acknowledging the attempts he was making to change ultimately allowed his defenses to come down. In time, this more strengths-based approach allowed Tommy to make great strides in the areas in which he had long been stuck.

WHAT COUNSELING IS NOT

With the many different uses of the word *counseling* in the English language, it is understandable that there may be some confusion about what counseling is and is not. For example, people might assume that the goal of counseling is simply for the counselor to give advice and for the counselee to act on that advice. However, while there may be a time and place for the counselor to offer an opinion or make a suggestion, counseling is built on the idea that, most of the time, the counselee has the potential to make good decisions but is too overwhelmed or confused, having insufficient self-awareness or lacking the support they need in order to be able to identify or act on what, at some level, they already know. The irony is that even though the counselee may ask for advice, the counselor adding their advice to the mix may actually be unhelpful. Either the counselor does not know the counselee well enough, the counselee resents the counselor's wisdom, or the counselor gives bad advice.

Furthermore, it cannot be our goal in counseling to *fix* the counselee, *make* them do or feel something, or *convince* them of something. This goal puts the counselee in too passive a role and puts too much responsibility and power in the hands of the counselor, violating the premise that counseling is collaborative and counselee focused. It furthermore undermines the belief that the counselee's sense of autonomy and personal responsibility needs to be honored. Tommy's previous counselors had not recognized that in doing what they thought would be helpful to Tommy (e.g., giving him homework to do and making suggestions as to what might be helpful) they were actually disempowering Tommy in his healing process.

The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it.

French philosopher Simone Weil, 1909–1943

*The wise in heart are called discerning,
and gracious words promote instruction.*

Proverbs 16:21

Finally, it is not the goal of counseling to make the counselee *feel* better. This can be particularly difficult for counselors who have been drawn to a helping role because they want to alleviate suffering. The irony is that counsees sometimes have to experience even a greater amount of pain than they were aware of initially in order to heal. The goal is to facilitate the counselee in *being* better, which in turn may eventually lead to their feeling better.

THE COUNSELOR'S ROLE

Although multifaceted, the counselor takes on very distinct and specific roles within the counseling relationship. The counselor serves as a confidant, a mirror, a coach, and an

encourager. As a *confidant*, the counselor is a person with whom the counselee can share personal and intimate things without fear that such information will later be disclosed by the counselor to anyone else. This confidentiality is a foundational element to the

*A gossip betrays a confidence,
but a trustworthy person keeps a secret. . . .
So avoid anyone who talks too much.*

Proverbs 11:13; 20:19

counseling relationship, as it provides a space for emotional safety for the counselee (we will explore the limits of confidentiality in the next chapter when we discuss counseling ethics).

As a *mirror*, the counselor uses both verbal and nonverbal communication to reflect back to the counselee what the counselor sees, hears, and experiences within the counseling relationship. As people, we are limited in our self-understanding and rely on the direct and indirect feedback of others to gain self-awareness, insights, and understanding of social cues. The counselor as a mirror seeks to reflect back to the counselee, without distorting the message or adding evaluative judgments, in order that the counselee can more clearly see the counselee's self and the situation.

*As water reflects the face,
so one's life reflects the heart.*

Proverbs 27:19

As a *coach*, the counselor brings their experiences and training to the therapeutic relationship in order to gently guide the counselee through the process of cultivating their skills, abilities, and aptitudes. In this, the counselor serves as the expert in the counseling process while honoring the counselee's role as expert of their own life. The coach helps to clarify vision, collaboratively design a plan, offer growth opportunities, and provide both challenges and affirmations along the way.

As an *encourager*, the counselor seeks to continuously remain in a position of respect, understanding, and hope toward the counselee. While it cannot be expected

that every counselor will like or enjoy every counselee, it is necessary that counselors prayerfully and intentionally strive to see, honor, and affirm the image of God in every counselee. Whether spoken or unspoken, the counselor as an encourager seeks to affirm and champion the steps of growth and the progress made by the counselee, no matter how small.

*Anxiety weighs down the heart,
but a kind word cheers it up.*

Proverbs 12:25

Unlike most friendships, counseling relationships are not reciprocal; the participants do not take equal turns sharing struggles, joys, and insights. Instead, in counseling, the counselor has the distinct role of coming alongside the counselee in order to facilitate the counselee's growth process. Counseling is all about what the *counselee* needs, not about relational reciprocity. Our goal as counselors is to ultimately work ourselves out of a job by collaborating with counsees to resolve their problems in a way that utilizes their strengths and talents.

The focus of the counselor is always on fostering, facilitating, and promoting the growth and the good of the counselee, not on the counselor's needs for growth, affirmation, or fulfillment. In working with Tommy, it would have been much easier for Fred to have been more directive; at least by giving homework he could have had more objective evidence of getting somewhere with Tommy—that is, if he actually completed it. Continuing to remind himself that the ultimate goal was what would be beneficial for Tommy allowed Fred to put aside more immediate needs for success and fulfillment. (In chapter two we will discuss further the person of the counselor, that is, what personal qualities and characteristics are necessary for a good counselor.)

THE COUNSELEE'S ROLE

The role of the counselee is much less complex than that of the counselor. Essentially the counselee needs to (1) recognize that something in their life is not the way they want it to be; (2) seek the support, input, or help of another person; and (3) be willing to, at least to some degree, honestly engage in a process of self-exploration and change. The degree to which a counselee can embrace these three elements will vary from one individual to another and may even change throughout the counseling process. Remember, it took Tommy several counselors over many years to be able to eventually truly engage in the process. Since many counsees have never before been in a counseling relationship, and others may not have had a good experience in previous counseling, we have found it beneficial not to assume that counsees understand the counseling process as we do. Therefore, we intentionally explain to counsees the respective roles of counselee and counselor at the beginning of the counseling relationship. This way everyone involved is clear as to what the respective roles are and can adjust their expectations accordingly at the beginning of the journey together.

THE CONCEPT OF MICROSKILLS

Long-term goals are often impossible to reach unless they are broken down into achievable short-term goals. So while it is important to collaboratively identify where the counselee eventually wants to end up, much of counseling involves helping the counselee to move to the next step in the counselee's growth process. We all tend to make life changes in small steps. Just as the counselee's long-term goals need to be dismantled into smaller pieces, so too the skills of counseling need to be divided into



what have been called *microskills*. Microskills are teachable, learnable segments of new behavior that combine together into the overall skills of counseling.

You have probably noticed that so far we have used the words *skills* or *microskills* repeatedly and interchangeably. Technically, *microskills* refer to the process of taking a large and complicated skill, what has been called a *macroskill* (e.g., skiing or bike riding) and dividing it into smaller, bite-size pieces. If the smaller pieces are mastered, the chances of mastering the larger, more complex skill are greatly improved. Balancing, pedaling, braking, steering, and negotiating bumps in the road are all microskills necessary in learning to ride a bike. Likewise, perceiving (chap. 4) and attending (chap. 5) are microskills that, when combined with each other and added to additional microskills, can help you to counsel constructively. Effective counseling consists of learned and practiced skill; simply desiring to help, having some knowledge of the counseling process, hoping for the best, or praying for someone are not enough. There are specific things we can learn in order to be helpful.

Types of Counselees and Counselors

The solution-focused/brief therapy literature identifies a helpful typology of counselee/counselor relationships (avoiding labeling people but emphasizing the relationship dynamic in each case). For further information, see Ziegler (2010).

1. Visitor/host: This counselee wants to window shop: checking counseling out, minimally investing, and leaving other options (such as miracles) open for achieving change. Such counsees are often mandated or pressured to go for counseling or have some ulterior motive (e.g., pleasing someone else). The role of the counselor is to be hospitable and ease the counselee into the process while being clear about what counseling is and is not. The downside of this set of roles is that counseling is potentially much more than being a gracious host.

2. Complainant/sympathizer: This counselee is interested primarily in discussing someone else in their life who is interpreted as causing the counselee's distress. This counselee wants the other person to change and wants help to get the other person to change. As counselors, in response to what are often sad and even traumatic relationship stories, we feel genuine sympathy, but sympathy does not facilitate change, as this book will emphasize. Counseling requires something more, something deeper.

3. Customer/consultant: This counselee truly wants to address an issue in their life, desires to change, wants to modify circumstances, and is willing to engage in the process—to buy into the process. The counselor becomes a consultant of the process, not determining the outcome for the counselee. The power of the counseling relationship is in this dynamic and these roles.

As counselors, we want to invest ourselves in customers and not waste our time and energy on the others, but our skills will go a long way to helping visitors and complainants become customers. Do not give up on visitors and complainants too soon; their fear and anxiety of what counseling will require of them may be what is getting in the way. A counselor's skills can quickly uncover this resistance to the process.

THE SKILL OF LEARNING NEW SKILLS

We all know that it is not enough to simply *want* to be good at doing something new; we have to figure out *how* to learn to be proficient at a task. In short, learning new skills is a skill in itself. Some people master it; others struggle repeatedly.

A metaphor: Learning a language. The journey of learning counseling skills is in many ways like learning a new language. Initially, you might have some limited vocabulary and a sense of the new language, but despite your confidence and natural language-learning abilities, fluency is a long way off. You may have used some of the new language in other contexts as you explain the change, growth, and healing process that people undergo. But the depth of fluency needed to engage with a counselee's deep concerns comes with its own structure, style of speech, and vocabulary, requiring you to take the natural skills you bring to this process and build on them.

Empirical Support

Hearn (1976) is a foundational research study on programmed learning of counseling skills showing that systematic training of counselors is effective. In 1990, Baker et al.'s meta-analysis compared Carkhuff's human resource training/development model, Ivey's microcounseling model, and Kagan's interpersonal process recall model. In the 1980s and 1990s these models were the most popular and widely used programs for training students in counseling skills courses. The meta-analysis showed that while all three were effective, there appeared to be a relationship between the length of training and the effect size.

Table 1.1. Comparison of microskills training models

Model	Effect Sizes	Hours of Training
Carkhuff (late 1960s)	1.07 (large)	37
Ivey (early 1970s)	0.63 (medium)	19
Kagan (mid-1980s)	0.20 (small)	9.5

Source: Baker et al., 1990

More recently, Little et al. (2005) combined the Carkhuff and Ivey models into

a training program called the Skilled Counselor Training Model, and many additional innovations and variations are found in the literature.

As the research has developed, studies have begun to look at what components (microskills) of the programs produce the largest effect sizes. Kuntze et al. (2009), with a sample of 583 students, studied seven basic skills (minimal encouragements, asking questions, paraphrasing, reflection of feeling, concreteness, summarizing, and situation clarification) and five advanced skills (advanced accurate empathy, confrontation, positive relabeling, examples of one's own, and directness) and found that each of the separate skills had large effect sizes, except for one advanced skill (examples of one's own), which had a moderate effect size. Another conclusion was that students taking a second (advanced) skill course increased their basic skill levels further as well as began to master the advanced skills; the amount of practice affects the development of skills. There are, unfortunately, no shortcuts.

If you have ever learned a second (or third) language, you understand that the process is both rewarding and frustrating. You know how to say all you think, feel, see, and so on in your native language, and it takes time to build up the same level of vocabulary, self-expression, and fluency in the new language. In counselor training, as with language learning, it may be necessary to *unlearn* some of your former language of helping in order to *relearn* the new language through systematic engagement with the microskills.

Another metaphor: Learning to drive. The microskills will be taught one at a time and will be sequenced so that they build on one another. They provide the basic structure and framework for the counseling process. When I (Elisabeth) was in driver's education, I was taught that keeping my hands on the steering wheel at the 10-and-2 position, as in the hands on a (nondigital) clock, was the proper way to drive. The idea of 10-and-2 being applied to counseling was first introduced to me by a friend and colleague, Dr. Elizabeth Keller-Dupree, as a helpful way to explain the process of learning the core counseling microskills. Whether you were taught 10-and-2, 9-and-3, 8-and-4, or simply to keep both hands on the wheel, there was likely a position you were taught to go back to as your proper driving form. If the counseling process is a road on which you journey with a counselee, microskills serve as the 10-and-2 position on the steering wheel as you navigate the counseling process.

However, many of us do not drive with our hands perfectly at 10-and-2 on the steering wheel all the time. In fact, we frequently drive with one hand, or at times may even drive with our knees! But the 10-and-2 position is where we come back to when the road is rough, the terrain is unknown, or the environmental conditions are dicey. The same is true in the counseling process. It is important that you learn to drive at 10-and-2, proving that you understand and can effectively use the foundational microskills of counseling, so that you can come back to them when you are unsure how to navigate the counseling conversation. Eventually, when you have mastered the 10-and-2 of the microskills, you will slowly take more freedom to incorporate alternate approaches to counseling, positions that may not be recommended in driving or counseling but are occasionally necessary.

RATIONALE FOR OUR METHOD OF LEARNING SKILLS

Our rationale for the methods used in this book is drawn from various sources within the education and counseling fields, combining what we see as the best of the methodologies. The well-known taxonomies of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains in education (Bloom et al., 1956) suggest that learning new information and skills involves all three domains and is not limited to simply the acquisition of cognitive knowledge (see Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, for an updated version of Bloom's taxonomy). Mental skills (the cognitive domain) are essential, but likewise skills related to feelings or emotional dynamics (the affective domain), and developing manual or physical skills (the psychomotor domain), are each relevant to the effective practice



of counseling. Hence learning counseling skills involves the learner cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally.

Learning New Skills Requires:

- motivation: a compelling purpose
 - receiving feedback
 - risking
 - resisting discouragement
 - practice and more practice
 - persistence
-
-

Other influences on our model include Linehan's (1993) approach to helping counselees develop new personal and interpersonal skills. In addition, we will be integrating elements of a programmed learning approach (Evans et al., 2017; Hearn, 1976), in which the learning process is scaffolded, one skill building on a previous skill. Finally, we will also add some of the practical steps of microskills acquisition as identified by Chang et al. (2018).

While we do not often break down the process in much detail, learning a new skill could be summarized in a sequence of steps such as the one in figure 1.1. Humans, as we grow and develop, have the ability to collapse these steps into an almost unconscious sequence. Only when we are really motivated do we make it more intentional in order to master more complex and significant skills.



Figure 1.1. Sequenced and scaffolded learning

HOW WE PLAN TO TEACH THE MICROSKILLS

We have chosen to break the process down into five major steps that will form an outline for each of the microskill chapters. While this is a sequenced (one following the other) and scaffolded (building on the previous step) approach, real skill acquisition may be more recursive than this suggests. The need to go back to prior steps and repeat and practice earlier steps that you thought you had already mastered is not an

uncommon experience and should not be cause for discouragement. The five steps we will use as an outline are:

Step 1: Provide a rationale for the skill. Any time a new skill is pursued, the learner must understand why this skill is relevant or important (Linehan, 1993). Therefore, when each new skill is introduced, we will look at *why* it is important. In terms of overall microskill development, research findings show that counselees report higher levels of satisfaction with the counseling process when microskills are used, regardless of whether the counselee is an adult or a child (De Stefano et al., 2010; Kuntze et al., 2009; van Velsor, 2004).

Step 2: Provide clear instruction. The second step in skill development is to *provide clear instruction* (Linehan, 1993). There is little that is more frustrating than being given a task without a clear sense of how it is to be done. In light of this, as each microskill is introduced we will clearly communicate *how* it is to be delivered and used within the counseling process. In many cases, a specific formula will be provided that serves as a template for exactly what to say.

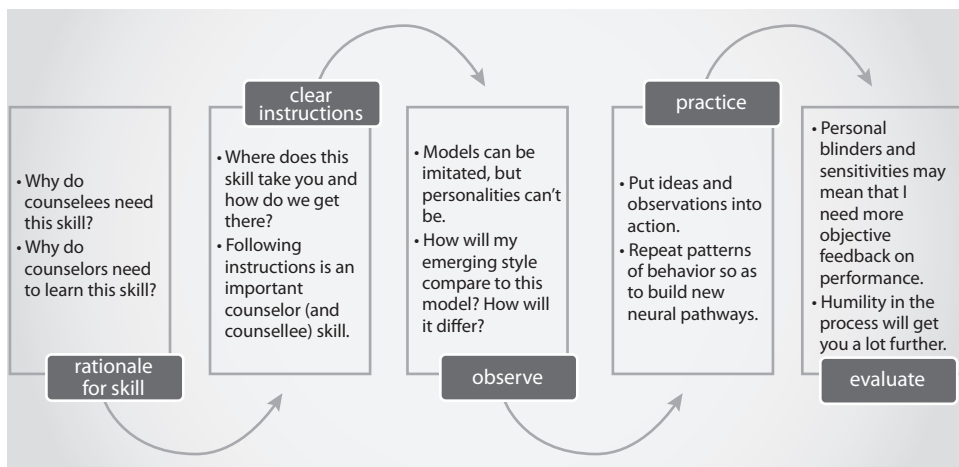


Figure 1.2. Our model of skill acquisition

Step 3: Observe an effective model. The third step in skill development is that of *observing an effective model* (Chang et al., 2018; Linehan, 1993). You will be provided with dialogue examples in which an exchange between a counselor and a counselee models the appropriate use of the skill being taught. The Instructor's Resources that are available to those using this book as a textbook or to train others include demonstrations of some of these skills.

Step 4: Practice the new skill. The fourth step in skill development flows naturally out of the third and is that of *practicing the new skill* (Chang et al., 2018; Linehan, 1993). It is not enough to simply read about and observe a new skill; making it your own requires multiple forms of practice. In some instances practice will mean reading an exchange between

counselee and counselor and filling in the missing blanks within the counselor's response. In other instances, practice will mean generating your own response from scratch, keeping in mind the formulas and guidelines presented along the way. Finally, other instances of practice will ask you to engage with a partner or a small group by taking on the role of counselor and responding to the narrative your role-playing counselee shares.

Step 5: Evaluate. The fifth step in skill development is that of *evaluation* (Chang et al., 2018; Linehan, 1993). Repeated efforts to learn a new skill must be accompanied by feedback so that necessary adjustments can be made to the process. Practicing skills incorrectly would be a waste of time.

Evaluation has two foci: evaluation of self and evaluation from others. *Evaluation of self* is the process by which you reflect on your own work, comparing it to the guidelines, standards, or answer keys that are available to you in this process. For written practice activities, this takes the form of comparing your responses to the key at the end of the chapter. For in-class and homework practice activities, this takes the form of reviewing your audio/video recording and comparing your responses to the standards and guidelines you have been given for the skill(s) being practiced.

Evaluation from others is often the most anxiety-provoking part of this process, for in it we invite others to comment on our demonstrated skills. For those who for whatever reason have some sensitivity regarding receiving feedback, this can easily become discouraging and demoralizing. In a later chapter we will address the dynamics of giving and receiving feedback in more depth.

Whether you are evaluating a classmate or you are the one being evaluated, it is important to remember that skill acquisition is a *developmental* process. This means that someone who is just learning a skill should not and cannot be evaluated by the same standard one would use to evaluate someone who has been using a skill for the last ten years. Because of this, we encourage evaluation to be on a Likert scale that looks something like this:

Table 1.2. Proficiency levels for ratings of microskills

Rating	Description
1	Does not use targeted skill appropriately—use of skill is ineffective or demonstrates a lack of understanding as to skill's purpose
2	Sometimes uses targeted skill appropriately—use of skill is minimally effective or demonstrates basic understanding of skill's purpose
3	Often uses targeted skill appropriately—uses skill appropriately more often than not, but still misses opportunities or misapplies skill
4	Regularly uses targeted skill appropriately
5	Consistently and appropriately uses targeted skill—use of skill is highly effective or demonstrates advanced understanding and proficiency

As you begin this journey of microskill development, your practice attempts early on in the process should *not* yield a score of five unless you are some kind of microskill genius. Your first few practices will likely be around a two or a three, and it may not be until a few months (or years) into counseling experience that you find yourself consistently at a four or five, particularly for the more advanced microskills. As you evaluate one another, be kind, but do not be dishonest in your kindness. Telling individuals that they did a great job when they actually have things to work on does not help them to learn the new skill. Likewise, it is not helpful to nitpick when their overall delivery was appropriate and effective.

THE PROFESSIONAL AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FORMING HABITS

The words *discipline* and *habit* do not evoke positive responses in our contemporary culture. Yet when we think about any professional person, we know that it took them practice to get where they are. We know this is true spiritually as well. Unfortunately, we do not simply grow into new healthy patterns of living and relating; it takes practice. Interestingly, the resistance you might feel in reading the words *discipline* and *habit* are the same reactions your counselees will have when you discuss with them the need to alter life patterns. Developing habits is often considered in the negative, for example, “I have the bad habit of saying ‘umm.’” We would like to reclaim a positive meaning for *habit* in the sense of encouraging counselors to develop the good habits of counseling. However, we know from our efforts at failing miserably at New Year’s resolutions that breaking old habits and acquiring new ones is harder than we think. This is where our spiritual resources (e.g., meditation, prayer, silence, conversation) can be a useful part of the process of developing *habitus*, the refinement of good patterns of relating to others for their own good, not necessarily ours.

Historical Reflection

Going back to Plato and Aristotle, humanity has been curious about the virtues (prosocial attitudes and behaviors) and how we can help promote virtuous thinking and behaving in others. One of the virtues that church fathers and later theologians (e.g., Augustine and Aquinas) have discussed is the importance of *habitus* (Latin).

Habitus is not simply developing good habits of moral behavior (repetition of automatic behaviors). *Habitus* refers to how repeated actions become internalized as perfected dispositions to act for good. Repeated actions can also become bad habits.

Habitus refers to nonidentical repetition (doing a similar thing over and over); it is a repetition of behavior that “forms beliefs, shapes and modulates emotion, and correctly aligns our appetites and apprehensions” (Hampson, 2012, p. 8). While they become second nature to us, they also evolve and become refined with practice.

Faith itself is a gift from God that we receive, but it is also a *habitus*; we must practice our faith. In the same way that the other virtues must be practiced, counseling skills must



be practiced to form in us a way of relating that is not only a nonidentical habitual pattern of responding but a deeply held set of beliefs and potential ways of engaging in helpful behaviors depending on the nuances and contexts of the particular situation. They too require continuous refinement.

THE COUNSELING PROCESS

Learning how to ride a bike was one of the previous metaphors we used for learning counseling skills. The microskills of balance, steering, and pedaling are all necessary for the macroskill of bike riding. But there is not a whole lot of value in learning how to ride a bike if you do not have a destination. Actually arriving at your endpoint involves all of the riding skills as well as knowing how to get there and what to do if there are detours or flat tires along the way.

Similarly, counseling involves a journey that you as the counselor and the counselee take together with a specific destination in mind. Developing good microskills is essential to the success of the trip, but part of the art of counseling involves knowing what microskills to use when. This is where an understanding of the process of counseling is crucial.

While each of the unique helping contexts (e.g., clinical, chaplaincy, etc.) we are addressing has its own distinctive aspects and styles, the processes of these various helping relationships have a lot in common. All counseling-type relationships consist of two (or more) people who have mutually agreed to go on a journey of growth together, a journey in which one person (the counselor) has the primary goal of facilitating the other person's (the counselee's) growth in a particular area.

In addition, the counseling process is not linear or sequential; it is circular and repetitive, more like a spiral, in that at times it feels as if things are being repeated, are not going anywhere, or are frustratingly slow. However, the spiral has an overall upward trajectory. We believe that in the repetition, the ups and downs of the process, growth is occurring. Created in the image of God (Gen 1:27), we are complex beings with multiple layers or facets. Therefore, cycling through the layers of our identities at different times, in slightly different ways, aids in the healing process.

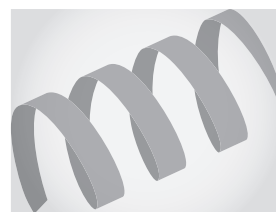


Figure 1.3. Spiral with upward trajectory

THE PHASES OF THE COUNSELING PROCESS: WHAT IS TARGETED WHEN

My (Fred's) master's thesis consisted in part of a massive literature review of stages or phases of the counseling process. It is amazing to see the variety of ways in which people can conceptualize it. In 1984 I found over 100 authors who described the

process, and now many more have added their wisdom to describe the process by which people change and grow.

The theoretical underpinnings of phase language. While many of these authors would describe their phases as universal for all counseling processes, the reality is that theoretical orientation often influences how such phases are described. For example, Wright's (1984) five-step model includes (1) relationship building, (2) exploration of problems, (3) deciding on a course of action, (4) stimulating action, and (5) terminating the counseling relationship. The language sounds very behavioral or oriented toward problem-solving approaches. In contrast, the five counseling phases outlined by Young (1992) include (1) initial contact, (2) commitment, (3) intimacy, (4) untying, and (5) termination. The relational terms imply a very different theory of counseling.

The phase challenge. As we considered how we would like to identify phases of the counseling process here, our dilemma was how could we describe them in a way that was not specifically geared to a particular theoretical approach and yet could be of benefit for helping students understand which skills should be used at certain points in the process. The solution we settled on with was to discuss the phases in the very simple terms of *early*, *middle*, and *late* phases. The amount of time spent in each phase will vary immensely, depending on the overall duration of counseling with a particular counselee. So, for example, if a particular counselee is in counseling on a weekly basis for a total of eight weeks, the first week or two would constitute the early phase, sessions three through six would constitute the middle phase, and sessions seven and eight would constitute the late phase. In contrast, if counseling were long term, the early phase might be the first year of counseling, the middle phase the next three years, and the final year the late phase.

Targets. We briefly described the concept of targets in the introduction to this book. While using the language of phases helps to give a sense of process over time, the idea of targets relates more to specific tasks or areas of focus that can be most helpful within a given phase of counseling but that can still be useful in other phases. Target 1, "Establishing Relationship and Exploring," is the main target area of the early phase of counseling. Target 2, "Deepening," and target 3, "Growing," are most helpful in the middle phase of counseling, and target 4, "Consolidating and Ending," will be the major focus during the late phase.

PHASES OF GROWTH AND CHANGE IN BIBLICAL AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

It is important to remember the role of the Holy Spirit in the change process. We all have had issues in our lives that have taken time to change. It can be easy to look at counselees and become impatient or discouraged by the lack of progress they appear to be making. In these moments we need to reflect on the process of change in our



own lives, noting the time and grace given to us by friends, family, and the Holy Spirit along the way.

John 16:7-13 reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit's job to convict people of the changes that need to be made in their lives. This same passage also reminds us that sometimes God withholds things from us because they are too much to bear in the moment. God is gracious and intentional in what he reveals to each of us at a given point in time so that we do not become overwhelmed and discouraged. Instead of bombarding us with everything that needs to change, God shows us, piece by piece, where growth is possible. It is the counselor's job to be prayerful and discerning, noting where a counselee is in the change process and keeping in mind that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit's job to convict and motivate toward change.

The emphasis on phases is not merely a twentieth- or twenty-first-century preoccupation. Scripture identifies a phase-like development in growth and change (see Prov 9:6; Eph 4:12-16; Phil 3:14). We can see stages of Christlikeness in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 and Hebrews 5:12-14. As Larkin (1967) puts it, "Divisions of growth are thus a framework for spiritual direction according to the needs and possibilities of different people" (p. 434). Larkin recognizes the need for a framework yet also the need to affirm the uniqueness of each person in terms of how the framework is applied. So, in both Scripture and psychology, the concept of development is crucial to understanding people, including ourselves.

In order to help conceptualize the various ways stages are understood, in table 1.3 is a summary of the classical stages or phases of spiritual direction (column one). These are aligned with the phases and targets as we are conceptualizing them in the counseling process (column two). As an example of one other phase model in counseling, the phases of treatment of survivors of complex trauma are given in the third column. The language of each is quite different and reflects the focus of the particular helping relationship. Though the language used in classical spiritual direction is perhaps foreign to many of us, it highlights several important dimensions of the counseling process.

Phase one (*purgation*) reminds one of the idea of purging. Purging is not a pleasant experience, but the term is descriptive of the need for people at the beginning of a counseling process to express, either reluctantly or in a gush of words, their pent-up, unprocessed life experience. This purging experience is what some psychoanalysts call catharsis, the venting of built-up emotion in therapy, often related to the counselee's personal stories. Cathartic release, or abreaction, a key element of psychodynamic and person-centered therapy, is considered healing in and of itself (Kearney, 2007; Von Glahn, 2012).

The second phase of spiritual growth, *illumination*, highlights the increased understanding of oneself and one's circumstances and begins the inner change process of illuminating the deeper and darker places in the counselee's life, and reflecting Christlike

virtues despite the struggles and frustrations that are an inevitable part of life. Use of the word *virtue* highlights the fact that ultimately the counseling process is about identifying strengths and positive aspects of self, not only pathology and problems.

The third phase, *union*, while using the idealistic language of perfection, suggests a point of completion, not unlike that rather odd term that often is used in the counseling literature, *termination* of the relationship. The important piece of this phase of spiritual direction is the idea of moving beyond oneself to connection with God and others in healthier ways that are characterized by charity (love).

Table 1.3. Comparison of phases of the change process from spirituality, counseling, and trauma therapy perspectives

Christian Spirituality ^a	Counseling Process	Complex-Trauma Therapy ^b
Purgation (release of sin and its effects)	Early phase: Target 1: Establishing relationship and exploring	Safety and stabilization
Illumination (growth in virtue and inner renovation)	Middle phase: Target 2: Deepening Target 3: Growing	Trauma processing (integrating the components of traumatic experiences)
Union (with God and others—perfect charity)	Late phase: Target 4: Consolidating and ending	Consolidation and resolution

Note: The three columns in this chart are not identical, but there are similarities. Each can learn from the other, yet each describes a particular type of helping relationship.

^aSee Coe, 2000; Larkin, 1967; Mulholland, 1993, chap. 8.

^bSee Gingrich, 2020.

The third column in table 1.3 identifies the phases of the counseling process with survivors of complex trauma (e.g., sexual abuse, chronic domestic abuse, ritual abuse). There is a wide range of incidents that can be subjectively experienced as traumatic, whether or not an external observer would necessarily view them as such. However, unresolved trauma will inevitably interfere with life and complicate the healing process. In the first phase a counselee needs to be helped to feel safe in the counseling relationship and to gain some sense of understanding and control of symptoms, particularly ones that are dangerous (e.g., self-harm). In the second phase the focus is on the long, tough work of processing the traumatic events. In the third phase the counselee experiences the resolution of the trauma and often emerges with a new sense of identity and wholeness.

The middle column identifies the three phases of the healing process we will use in this book, along with the targets of focus. Whether in a twenty-minute conversation or throughout a twenty-week counseling relationship, the three phases are important and typically present. As we briefly overview each phase with its related tasks, it is important to note that the phases are meant to build on one another and must be approached in order. With that being said, it is always possible and sometimes necessary to circle back and revisit previous phases in order to effectively journey with the counsees through their stories.

THE HOURGLASS METAPHOR

The counseling process functions much like an hourglass. The top of the hourglass might represent how counsees are initially all over the place—the topics are far-reaching, and the discussion does not go particularly deep. Some of this is intentional on the part of the counselor in order to gather data on all facets of the counselee’s life. Gradually specific issues come more into focus, and therapeutic work becomes more narrowly concentrated (the middle of the hourglass). The sand flows quickly, and intensity and depth are increased. Finally the content/topics once again become broader as counsees learn how to generalize what they have learned and apply that to their lives and relationships (the bottom of the hourglass). This hourglass analogy can be helpful in describing the process of counseling both within each individual session and in the overall counseling relationship. The hourglass suggests that timing and control of the process are crucial—too fast or too slow can hamper the process.

The top section of the hourglass, initially full of sand. This represents the information, the many details of the story and of the counselee’s life. There is often a lot of confusion, and while some counseling goals may be identified, others may be unclear. Target 1 (Establishing Relationship and Exploring) skills will be most effective here.

In more clinical settings, one of the tasks is to gather and organize the information provided by the counselee into a diagnosis. Again, borrowed from medical contexts, the concept of diagnosing a problem is deeply embedded in much counseling literature. An introductory overview of the diagnosis process is provided in the “Diagnostic Implications” sidebar.



Figure 1.4. Hourglass

Diagnostic Implications

Diagnosis is the categorization of mental disorders. In most ministry contexts diagnosing people is not helpful and is not done. In professional counseling contexts it is required. The world of diagnosing is the world of psychiatry, specially trained medical doctors, who typically meet with patients, listen for descriptions of symptoms, and prescribe medication. This is an essential component of mental health services, and as a result psychiatrists are the experts in diagnosis.

This is seen most clearly in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR; APA, 2022)* published by the American Psychiatric Association (Note: This is not the American Psychological Association, which also uses the acronym APA.) Because of its technical language, research base, and medical aspects, the *DSM* is a highly specialized document but one that has become very accessible with the help of the internet. Therefore the general public has become much better informed, which can be both a positive trend, in that people can take greater interest and responsibility for their own mental

health, and a negative factor, in that misunderstanding the technical aspects of diagnosis is likely, and there is a tendency to use the language to label others.

Since 2013 the *DSM* includes information related to the ICD-10-CM (International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision, Clinical Modification). The ICD includes all medical disorders as well as the mental disorders that are the focus of the *DSM*. It is used more widely throughout the world in countries outside the United States.

The *DSM* is described as being *a-theoretical* in that it does not assume a particular theory of causation or treatment. However, there are a few alternative, theory-driven approaches to diagnostic categories and treatment (e.g., McWilliams, 2020; PDM Task Force, 2006; L'Abate, 1998).

Professional counselors must become familiar with the *DSM* and use it frequently, depending on their practice setting. It is advisable for people helpers in other settings to avoid using the *DSM*. The rationale for not using the *DSM* is

- the danger of labeling people—sometimes when we label people, they end up acting according to their label (think about the profound influence labeling children can have)
- the assumption that the *DSM* includes all mental disorders—it is not the only way of conceptualizing psychopathology
- the adherence to the medical model of understanding and treating people—this can be a limiting approach to understanding people holistically
- the lack of recognition of the relational component of people's problems—a diagnosis is typically made of an individual rather than a relationship
- the difficulty in diagnosing crossculturally—symptoms mean different things in different cultures
- the rejection of a spiritual/religious worldview

The rationale for using the *DSM* is

- the ability to study groups of people with similar symptoms and to determine the effectiveness of various treatment approaches
- the advantage of being able to focus our helping efforts for specific clients in ways that are evidence-based rather than just treating counselees based on our hunches or preferences
- the recognition that specific categories of symptoms are more physiologically caused than situationally or dispositionally caused
- the ability to distinguish, at least to some degree, biological, emotional, relational, or spiritual issues

The *DSM* is a valuable resource; it has been and will continue to be a helpful resource for counselors of all varieties. However, it is a specialization that not all counselors have the luxury to learn well, so caution is warranted. Of most importance in this regard is the recognition that diagnosing is not equivalent to counseling: being a good diagnostician is not the same as being a good counselor. They use different sets of skills.

The narrowing of the hourglass. The counselor is seeking to facilitate the counselee's self-exploration and sense of self-awareness within their given situation. There is a narrowing, or clarifying, of the problem or the situation as the counselor and



counselee work their way down to the neck of the hourglass. Target 2 (Deepening) skills are essential at getting past what is often a superficial sense of what kind of change is needed early on in the process, into the underlying or deeper issues. This generally marks the beginning of the middle phase of counseling.

Biblical/Theological Connections

At the heart of this book will be what we will call a theology of emotion. As we learn effective counseling skills, we must wrestle with how we view persons, how emotions play a central role in people's problems, how the counseling process must pay close attention to the emotional experience of counselees, and how emotions factor into the process of personal and spiritual growth and change (see Collins & Collins, 2019, Elliott, 2006, 2014; Peterman, 2013; Scazzero, 2017, for reflections on this topic).

A theology of emotion is anchored in the teaching of Scripture on the nature of God; the image of God, in which persons are created; the interaction of emotions, cognition, behavior, and volition; and the life of Christ. Subsequent chapters will unpack these ideas, which together present a preliminary outline of a theology of emotion. We believe such a theological foundation is essential for effective counseling.

We do not take for granted a positive perspective toward emotion, since in our Christian tradition emotions have often been thought of as the part of the person that most likely will lead us into sin. In the history of psychology, emotions have often been considered the cause of dysfunction and immaturity. Take a few moments to assess to what degree you believe/accept these statements as true. Where did these beliefs come from? Do they fit with a biblical understanding of human emotions?

- > There is a right way to feel in every situation.
- > Letting others know that I am feeling bad is a weakness.
- > Negative feelings are destructive.
- > Being emotional means being out of control.
- > If I give in to my emotions, I will lose control of myself.
- > Emotions just happen for no reason.
- > All painful emotions are the result of a limited or faulty view of God.
- > If others don't approve of my feelings, it means I shouldn't feel the way I do.
- > Other people are the best judge of how I should be feeling.
- > Painful emotions are not really important in life and so should be dismissed.
- > I must never let my emotions get the better of me. If I do, I will be sinning.
- > Only prayer can take away emotions that are out of control.
- > Within the mature, spiritual Christian, reason and emotion are in a war, and reason should win.
- > Behavior is justified because you feel a certain way.
- > Being emotionally restricted is just the way men are.
- > Overemotional reactions are just part of being a woman.
- > Being calm, neither up nor down, is a goal and sign of good mental health.
- > Being calm, neither up nor down, is a goal and sign of being a spiritual person.

At the narrowest point of the hourglass. The counselor and counselee really zero in on specific aspects of the key counseling goals. There is an intensity and depth to this part of the middle phase of counseling when target 2 skills are being used effectively.

Launching into the base. Everything up until this point in the counseling relationship has led to this point, which could not have been reached without making its way through the funnel. In this part of the middle phase of counseling, target 2 skills continue to be used, and target 3 (Growing) becomes an increased focus as the hard work of growing and changing is at its peak.

Approaching the bottom of the base. As the process fans out and approaches the bottom of the hourglass, the late phase of counseling and target 4 (Consolidating and Ending) come into play. The changes that occurred during the difficult work of the middle phase of counseling now need to be consolidated so that they become permanent. Preparing counsees for leaving the counseling relationship is the final aspect of target 4.

Each phase of counseling builds on the progress made in the previous phase, as long as the related tasks have been accomplished well, with each one serving to bring counsees closer to meeting their goals. See figure 1.5 for a summary of the microskills that are associated with each phase of the counseling process.

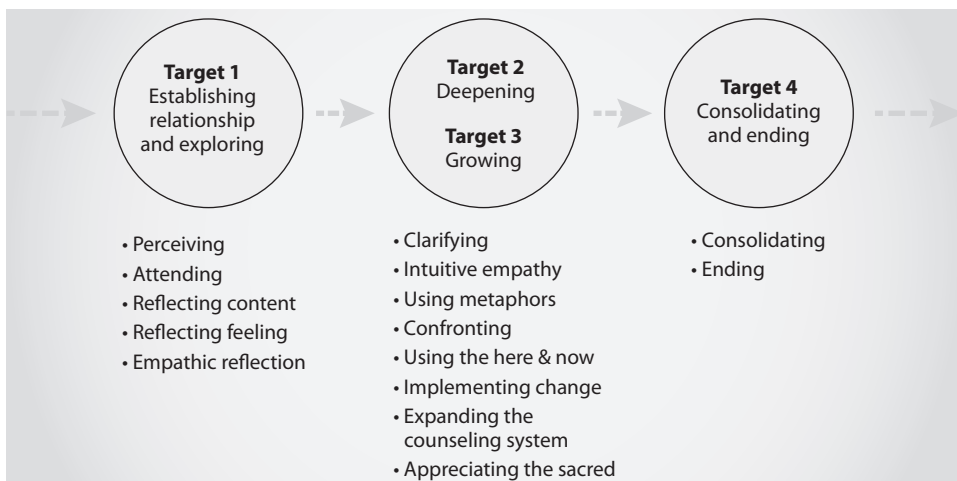


Figure 1.5. The phases, microskills, and chapters

CONCLUSION

We are excited to have you join us on this journey of counseling skill development. Taken piece by piece, the microskills approach helps students build skills one at a time, solidifying a strong foundation in the process of becoming an effective counselor. Like learning a second language or going on a bike trip, the journey is one of excitement and discovery.

In order to learn the microskills necessary for counseling, it is your responsibility to come into this process with at least some degree of purpose (*why* you want to acquire counseling acumen) and intentionality (a proactive and positive attitude toward the process). As your guides on this journey, it is our job, along with your trainers, course instructors, or supervisors, to give you some structure and opportunities to practice, but you in turn must provide the time and effort that practice requires. Your instructors' and peers' responsibility is to provide you with feedback as you practice. In response, you will need to graciously accept constructive criticism, recognizing that receiving both positive and negative feedback is essential to successful mastery of a particular microskill. Finally, application is found first within your homework and in-class small group activities, and then within the ministry or clinical contexts in which you may work.

All of this can feel a little overwhelming, but we encourage you to find purpose and motivation that will sustain you through the process. For Christian counselors, at least some of our motivation is not only to learn a professional or personally beneficial skill; it is also to follow Jesus' teaching and example. His concern and love for all people compels us to be as effective in helping others as is humanly possible. But despite a powerful purpose, the risks can be overwhelming for some. It is important to consider the costs of discipleship (Bonhoeffer, 1995) in this regard. Perseverance, or as the King James Version calls it, *longsuffering* (Gal 5:22), is a fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit becomes our strength when we can no longer continue in our own strength.

Welcome to the community of counselors, both in secular and the ministry-based environments, who have gone before you. As you learn the skills that can help you effectively care for the souls of others, may you be encouraged, transformed, and renewed in your understanding of how God uses each of us to care for one another.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think of a skill you have learned in the past (e.g., academic, computer, athletic, music) and reflect on the process. How hard was it? How motivated were you? Did you become discouraged along the way? What were the essential elements in achieving success? What kept you going when it felt like you might never get the hang of it?
2. Based on that experience, how would you complete this sentence: "I learn new skills best by . . ."? Could this be helpful in learning the new skills of counseling?
3. In learning a new skill, what is the hardest part for you? What gets in the way? How are you going to compensate for this as you learn the skills of counseling?
4. What has brought you to the point of wanting to learn counseling skills?
5. On a scale of one (low) to ten (high), what is your level of motivation for learning counseling skills? What could you do to choose to raise that number by one or two points?



6. How does your faith, your relationship with God, and his body, the church (Christian community), factor into this learning process?
7. How will you handle discouragement when you are feeling stuck or frustrated with the slow development of your counseling skills?



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