

Developing and applying embedded counselling skills: what happens after initial training?

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This poster was presented at the 49th SPR International annual meeting: integrating diversity into psychotherapy research, 27-30 June 2018, VU University Amsterdam, Netherlands

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Poster presented at the Society for Psychotherapy Research Annual Conference

Amsterdam, June 2018

What is embedded counselling?

The use of counselling skills by practitioners in occupations where counselling is not their main function: nurses, doctors, teachers, social workers, clergy, police

Effective embedded counselling requires:

- competence in core counselling skills: listening, empathic reflection, exploring meaning, exploring emotion, use of questions, silence, metacommunication, challenging, use of self
- identifying and making use of empathic opportunities: moments when the client or service user refers to troubling aspects of their personal experience
- negotiating time and space to facilitate brief, focused therapeutic conversations
- awareness of limitations of competence – when and how to refer clients on to specialist services
- ability to reflect on practice and use supervision and peer support
- taking account of cultural and organisational factors

Training in embedded counselling

Certificate in Counselling Skills – offered by colleges, universities and other training providers across Scotland - 120 hours contact time – access open to anyone capable of benefitting

Syllabus

Theoretical perspectives: person-centred, psychodynamic, CBT, Transactional Analysis

Intensive practice of counselling skills, with peer and tutor feedback

Personal development groups and personal learning journal

Professional issues (informed consent, confidentiality, boundaries, risk management, supervision, practitioner self-care, research-informed practice)

Assessment

Exploring personal strengths and limitations around use of counselling skills

Reflection on personal self-awareness and development

Analysis of transcript of counselling session with a client

Case study of a helping relationship

Occupational backgrounds of students in the Abertay Certificate in Counselling Skills

activity co-ordinator, advocacy worker, artist, bank manager, business adviser, care assistant, carer (of family member), charity worker, civil servant, clergy, community worker, complementary health practitioner, doctor, firefighter, funeral services operative, gardener, hospice worker, housing advisor, manager, market researcher, mental health nurse, midwife, music therapist, nurse, nursery assistant, office manager, physiotherapist, police officer, retired, scientist, shamanic practitioner, social worker, student, support worker, teacher, unemployed, university lecturer/professor, yoga teacher, youth worker

What happens after initial training?

On-line survey questionnaire: circulated to 316 students who had completed the programme, for whom a valid email address was available

Responses received from 155 88% female; 12% male

Age range at time of taking course: 22-62
Age distribution: 20-29 (24%); 30-39 (30%); 40-49 (36%); over 50 (10%)

Ethnicity: 97% white European

KEY FINDINGS

69 (44%) go on to further training as a counsellor/psychotherapist/psychologist/mental health nurse
80 (51%) continue to use counselling skills in their primary occupation
6 (5%) not in work/further training after completing the course (retired, carer)

What was learned? Two main themes:

- skills that can be used in the workplace
- personal development, self-awareness and self-confidence

"...the opportunity to study counselling skills was absolutely invaluable to me, and something I wish was available to everyone. I found the course one of the most positive and enjoyable educational experiences of my life...it really is wonderful that people from all different professions - some considering becoming counsellors, and some not, can study counselling skills to assist them in their (working) lives"
"I am more confident about ways of working in a facilitative, empowering way with others...being able to listen attentively also helps very much in working alongside others"

"...much better able to deal with stressed or upset young people"

"I am much more confident working with people now, as a manager/supervisor"

"I learned so much about myself and it has enhanced my life. I value myself now as I didn't before"

"In the past I often felt useless and impotent at not being able to change people's circumstances.... I still do, but I realise now in my work with people with memory loss and dementia, that people need to tell their stories to an interested listener, especially in adverse situations: the lack of someone to talk to can lead to incredible emotional loneliness"

"The aspects of the course where I worked in groups particularly helped me as I am involved in the management of groups in my work"

"The skills course helped me to understand others and more particularly myself. It gave me skills to support others"

"I cannot adequately convey the value of this course to me.... it completely changed my life in ways I did not expect. [...] The course for me fostered hope that even the most difficult circumstance can be eased by the presence and perseverance of a supportive other. I think that at times we are all too quick to give up on people and this course taught me the value and benefit of believing and hoping"

"I work as a housing caretaker.... I have been in the job for a year now and have 90% of the time been using everything you taught in class. Working with everyday people, who just at times need a wee chat. Many ranges of needs but all worth a ear....there was a young mum felt as if she had enough of life and didn't want to be here anymore. Talked a lot with her over time and she is now seeing someone on a regular basis"

"[As a teacher] it has helped me build, maintain and nurture relationships with students better within the educational environment, my skills learned from counselling really helped me out here and it has been such a privilege to see them flourish and become more confident in their educational abilities...I know when to stay silent with a student, let them talk, I know when to ask open questions to elicit information that they themselves need for their educational work, I know when to support and to take a step back with regards to self-directed learning"



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Intensive training in embedded counselling skills provided competencies that participants reported as being of everyday practical value in their work settings

The opportunity to study with students with a wide range of occupational and life experience was viewed as enhancing the learning experience

All aspects of the training - theory, practical skills and self-awareness – were regarded as helpful

The opportunity to undertake this training in mid-career allowed some participants to renew their commitment and motivation for their work

For other participants, the course opened up new career pathways

Further research is needed to:

- Explore in more detail the ways in which practitioners use embedded counselling skills in specific work settings
- Identify the forms of support that practitioners use to sustain these skills following completion of training
- Evaluate the effects of competence in embedded counselling skills for health, social care and educational outcomes



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Read more about embedded counselling

Høigaarda, R. and Mathisen, P. (2008) Informal situated counselling in a school context. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 21, 293–299
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