Personalising skills

Preamble

In simple terms, the previous chapters have been concerned with a range of skills that combine to help clients 'tell their story' in a way that enables them become clear about where they stand in relation to a troubling issue. In equally simple terms, the personalising skills not only help clients see what they need to do to deal effectively with the same troubling issue, but they also help them to assume responsibility, and willingness, for doing it. Functionally speaking, then, the personalising skills provide an intellectual and emotional bridge between the insights gained in the earlier exploratory phase and the action that will be required in the initiative phase that follows.

This chapter will detail the cues that counsellors need to recognise before shifting from using the responding skills to using the personalising skills. It will then discuss the personalising skills in detail; provide examples and written exercises; and outline a practice strategy. Before proceeding, it is useful to consider how other authors deal with helping clients identify the goals that will help them manage life more effectively.

George and Cristiani (1990) tend to describe the key concepts of a broad range of counselling approaches and counselling issues rather than detailing specific skills or processes for practical counselling. However, in discussing procedures and skills, they note that Egan's advanced empathy skills are useful in identifying themes. This is one of the activities related to the first step of personalising.

Nelson-Jones (1992) presents a five stage counselling process that uses the acronym 'DASIE' whose components are: (1) '**D**evelop the relationship, identify and clarify problem(s)'; (2) '**A**ssess problem(s) and redefine in skills terms'; (3) '**S**tate working goals and plan interventions'; (4) '**I**ntervene to develop self-helping skills'; and (5) '**E**nd and consolidate self-helping skills. Stage 2 of Nelson-Jones' process identifies the problem areas, and the 'thinking and action skills weaknesses that sustain them'. Stage 3 then considers the 'best way to manage problems and develop requisite skills'. It does this in two phases by firstly stating the goals, and then planning interventions. Goals are originally 'stated in terms of the broad skills required to attain ends', and then broken down into a range of sub-skills (Nelson-Jones 1992, p. 48).

The personalising process described in this text is similar to the 'A' and 'S' elements of the DASIE process in that it assesses problems, defines them in skills terms, and identifies goals. However, the personalising process differs from the DASIE process in

problems they are experiencing. A typical miracle question is: 'If a miracle happened and the problem was solved, what would you be doing differently' (Geldard & Geldard 2001, p. 220). Goal-oriented questions are used to help clients find solutions. In our view, the examples given show a great variation in regard to goal orientation. Some are exploratory. 'What do you think your life would be like if you didn't get angry?' Others relate to setting a specific goal: 'If you had a particular goal that you wanted to achieve with regard to…, what would it be?'. Still others relate to action planning, 'What would you need to do to achieve your goal?'. The examples are from Geldard & Geldard (2001, pp. 220–221). The approach may be post-modern, but in our view still embodies a disjointed approach that is avoided by the systematic personalising process.

Earlier references have been made to Carkhuff's research and subsequent refining of the helping process. The last major refinement to that work was the identification of the personalising skills. These skills provide a fluent bridge for counsellors to move from responding to initiating. The profound benefit for clients is that the personalising skills provide a clear understanding of the relevance and necessity of the personal goal that emerges—as well as providing motivation and a sense of personal responsibility to achieve the goal. This systematic approach, and its efficiency and effectiveness is not matched by any other process known to us. For that reason, much of what follows is similar to Carkhuff's latest publications (2000, 2000a, 2000b). However, through the years we have refined and modified the steps in several ways. We will comment on these differences as they occur.

Reviewing current competence

To establish a learning baseline readers should identify the strategies they currently use when setting goals. The following questions may help to elicit your usual approach.

1. Do I fully explore all the related factors before setting my own goals?

2. Do my goals randomly emerge 'as the spirit moves me'?

3. Can I describe a clear distinction between setting goals and achieving them?

4. How do I go about helping others set goals?

5. Does my way help others to 'own' their goal, or do they tend to be uncommitted to a goal that we have previously discussed?

6. Have I had feedback from others that they really see the point of gaols that I have helped them set, and feel motivated and energised to achieve them?

The personalising process

The personalising process provides the bridge between 'responding' and 'initiating'.

PRE-HELPING ⇨ RESPONDING ⇨ PERSONALISING ⇨ INITIATING

Simply put, the process makes sense of what the client has explored in the responding phase, and leads to a clear understanding of the initiatives needed for clients to **change** their behaviour creatively, **adapt** to their circumstances comfortably, **quit** them with dignity, or **transcend** them with serenity—whatever befits their growth and wellbeing.

The specifics of the goals that lead to change, adaptation, departure, or transcendence are not just 'good ideas that might be worth trying'. They are logically derived from the synthesis, analysis, and diagnosis of the information generated by the client in the exploratory phase. It is critical, therefore, that the exploratory phase has adequately considered all of the significant pieces that relate to the particular person, in the given circumstances, within the context of their unique history. Comprehensive exploration paves the way for an effective crossing of the bridge. Inadequate exploration is likely to require a retreat to the causeway to 'lay more pavers'. The trick is to know when exploration is adequate. The skill is to know how to read the 'road signs'.

Signs of readiness

In addition to responding to clients' information during the exploratory phase, counsellors must also listen for the 'signs of readiness' to begin the personalising process. These signs are a bit like traffic lights. The analogy shows the folly of ignoring the red light, the risks of running the amber, and the safety of proceeding on the green.

Red stop light

Client externalises
Readers will recall that clients invariably tend to externalise responsibility for their circumstances during the exploratory phase, and that counsellors' responses contain externalised reasons for the current feelings to provide judgement-free opportunity for such expression. Quite the opposite applies in the personalising phase. Counsellors now ensure that statements are 'internalised'—made 'personal' to the client. The word '**you**' becomes the focus—not external people things or events. At some stage in the exploratory process, clients may make some comment that is internalised, such as, 'W*ell* I *guess it's not all their fault—*I'*m no angel either—*I…'.' This example may lead to further 'I' statements that imply some degree of 'ownership' of the issue under discussion. However, it must be remembered that is **futile and premature** to start to personalise whilst explorers continue to externalise, and blame others for their state of being. The red light must not switch to amber until the client has at least begun to internalise—with the one exception (detailed on page 307) where certain clients become repetitive.

Amber caution lights

Client internalises
The previous discussion suggested that progress is being made when clients internalise their statements during their exploration. This is a necessary step to prepare for personalising—but it is not a sufficient, stand-alone indicator. The quality of internalised statements may vary considerably, but some internalised statements indicate an avoidance of commitment to change. For example:

> 'I'*m really hopeless.* I'*ll never be any different.* I *am what* I *am'*.

High exploration has occurred
During an effective exploratory process, clients make significant links between hitherto unrecognised connections. These will be expressed in an statement such as, 'I'*m really only just beginning to see how important my* G*randma has been in my life—she's not the old tyrant* I *thought she was—she's been a real nurturer for me'*. Such insights are very helpful in moving clients toward an understanding of where they stand in relation to an issue, and they add impetus towards personalising—but not by themselves. There should be several instances of high exploration to ensure that 'new ground' has been covered.

Client and counsellor recognise themes

When the exploratory process begins, a problem situation may be presented such as, say, a relationship problem with a supervisor at work. After some time the client may realise that the problem is similar to the difficult relationship they have with the Chair of the Selection Committee at their local bowling club. Further in the discussion, some parallels are then seen to have previously occurred at secondary school—and surprise, surprise, they had the same sort of issue with their dad as a kid. The client may see the theme equally as well as the counsellor and say something like:

> '*Gee, after all that talk, it's pretty clear that I have strife with people that have a sort of power over me—judge me in some way. You know, stuff like: Do I get a promotion? Am I good enough to skipper a ring at bowls? Can I matriculate? And God knows how many things I stuffed up as far as my dad was concerned*'.

This is high exploration. This level of client self-awareness may tempt some counsellors to switch to green, but prudent counsellors will patiently await further evidence.

Counsellor hears client's contribution

It is possible that the client, alluded to above, was not yet able to see beyond their recognition of a life-theme. However, the counsellor may well have gleaned sufficient evidence to hypothesise about how the client contributes in some way to the recurrence and perpetuation of their problem with 'power people'. It is highly probable that many counsellors, who were confident of the accuracy of their diagnosis of the client's contribution to their problem, would risk moving to step one of the personalising process. Most would do so successfully—even though the light is still amber.

Green go light

Client recognises contribution

The foolproof indicator for beginning to personalise is when the client recognises their contribution to their problem—the behaviour that we have come to call the 'do-do'. The client in the earlier example could internalise a statement along these lines:

> '*Do you know what it seems like to me? It's like, as a kid, I was never good enough to please my old man, and copped plenty of criticism. It's just dawned on me that I somehow still expect a negative response from the likes of my boss, and I mouth off at 'em in a very defensive way that puts me a really negative light. Yeah! That's what I do! I constantly anticipate the worst from people who influence what I do, then mouth off in a way that I shoot myself in the foot, so to speak. It's about time I sorted my self out*'.

This client started to personalise for themselves. We will see in later examples how counsellors incorporate such insights.

Flashing amber light

Flashing amber lights indicate that you do not have absolute right of way, but you may proceed with caution. The analogy holds for personalising in two situations—the foreshadowing of initiative; and, in some instances, of the client repeating their story.

Client foreshadows initiative

In the 'green light' statement above, the client not only recognised his/her contribution to the problem, but expressed a desire to 'do something about it'. Declaring such a desire to act is called 'foreshadowing an initiative'. Foreshadowing adds weight to the counsellor's decision to 'go green', but in isolation, should be considered as 'flashing amber'. For example, clients may say things like, '*What a mess. I'm sick of feeling like this all the time, I really must do something about it*'.

The next 18 pages describe the skill steps for the four broad steps of personalising that are rated at 3.25, 3.5, 3.75, and 4.0. Then follows part of an exercise that could include ratings 1.0 to 4.0.

Exercise 14: Rating responses to level 4.0

Use the scale on the previous page to rate the responses to the following client statements.

Teacher to a colleague:

'I'*m about to give up on my exercise program again.* I *just can't stick to it.* I *know about the need for energy and all that, but* I *just get overwhelmed with other things that* **have** *to get done and my exercises just fall by the wayside—what's the use?*'

Response	Rating
1. 'You sound really frustrated because the demands on your time force you to drop your exercise program.'	
2. 'You feel a bit disappointed with yourself because you can't find a way to ensure that your exercise program gets priority over other things, and you really want to find a way to ensure your exercise program gets priority'.	
3. 'You are a busy bloke and a damn good organiser. What's more I've heard you say that you know you focus better at work when you work out regularly at the gym. The weird bit is that you actually put that perspective in the bin, and scuttle your energy when there's a big project on—all of which leaves you feeling drained.'	
4. 'You feel frustrated because, whilst you realise the importance of keeping fit, you invariably let your programs slide because somehow you let other things build up to these periodic crises.'	
5. 'You really want to find time to maintain a level of fitness so that you can manage the rest of your world better, but you just can't find a way to ensure that your exercise program gets priority over other things; and for a good organiser like you I guess that that realisation makes you a bit disappointed with yourself.'	

Mother to friend

'I *let my kids do what they like until they run so wild* I *can't stand them any longer then 1 really clamp down on them and come on so heavy* I *can't stand myself.*'

Response	Rating
6. 'Have you tried talking to them, and tried to work out a happy medium?"	
7. You want to find the right balance between freedom and control—so that everybody's happy. It's bad enough to know that you don't do that, but when you realise that you **can't** you get really mad with yourself.	
8. 'You find it hard to raise kids without either spoiling them or hurting them.'	
9. 'I do the same!'	
10. 'You're saying that you 'blow hot and cold'. You're either too hard on them or too soft, and that whichever way you do it you end up feeling continually frustrated.'	