

Notebook on Ethics, Legal Issues, and Standards for Counsellors

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What is Counselling?

A Search for a Definition

Those of us who work as professional counsellors are confident that we know what counselling is and when given an opportunity we are ready and eager to tell others what we do. However, when challenged to provide a crisp, comprehensive, and boundary-setting definition of counselling, we often falter. This may be because of the diversity of counselling approaches, its grounding in many theoretical perspectives, and the range of human problems for which counselling can be helpful. This definitional challenge is made all the more difficult because of the myriad of uses and activities for which the term 'counselling' is applied.

CCA is now being asked to create its definition of professional counselling. Those who request such a definition hope for some relief from the current state of semantic promiscuity, and for assistance in determining if a particular activity is within the counselling domain or outside it. Given the current striving for the statutory regulation of counselling it is assumed that a clear and comprehensive associational definition could provide the basis for establishing the scope of practice provision within any regulatory statute.

For this **Notebook** I thought it might be appropriate to ask all our members to reflect on this challenge of creating a CCA definition of counselling. You can help by sharing definitions with us, both any that you have found useful and any that you have created.

As way of getting the ball rolling, I am including the following definitions of professional counselling from my collection:

- The British Association for Counselling (BAC), now the BACP, may have been the first professional association to adopt a definition of professional counselling. In 1986 it published the following definition:

Counselling is the skilled and principled use of relationship to facilitate self- knowledge, emotional acceptance and growth and the optimal development of personal resources. The overall aim is to provide an opportunity to work towards living more satisfyingly and resourcefully. Counselling relationships will vary according to need but may be concerned with developmental issues, addressing and resolving specific problems, making decisions, coping with crisis, developing personal insights and knowledge, working through feelings of inner conflict or improving relationships with others.

The counsellor's role is to facilitate the clients work in ways that respect the client's values, personal resources and capacity for self-determination.

BAC (1986) **Counselling-Definition of terms in use with expansion and rationale** (Information Sheet 1). Rugby: British Association for Counselling.

- In 1993, Feltham and Dryden included the following definition of counseling in their specialized ***Dictionary of Counselling***:

Counselling is a principled relationship characterised by the application of one or more psychological theories and a recognised set of communication skills, modified by experience, intuition and other interpersonal factors, to clients' intimate concerns, problems or aspirations. Its predominant ethos is one of facilitation rather than of advice-giving or coercion. It may be of very brief or long duration, take place in an organisational or private practice setting and may or may not overlap with practical, medical and other matters of personal welfare.

It is both a distinctive activity undertaken by people agreeing to occupy the roles of counsellor and client and it is an emergent profession.... It is a service sought by people in distress or in some degree of confusion who wish to discuss and resolve these in a relationship which is more disciplined and confidential than friendship, and perhaps less stigmatising than helping relationships offered in traditional medical or psychiatric settings.

Feitham, C. and Dryden, W. (1993) Dictionary of Counselling. London, : Whurr

- In 1997 the Governing Council of the American Counselling Association(ACA) accepted the following definition of professional counselling:

Counseling is the application of mental health, psychological or human development principles, through cognitive, affective, behavioral or systemic interventions, strategies that address wellness, personal growth, or career development, as well as pathology. (<http://counseling.org>)

The definition also includes these additional attributes:

- *Counseling deals with wellness, personal growth, career, and pathological concerns.* In other words, counselors work in areas that involve relationships (Casey, 1996). These areas include intra- and interpersonal concerns related to finding meaning and adjustment in such settings as schools, families, and careers.
- *Counseling is conducted with persons who are considered to be functioning well and those who are having more serious problems.* Counseling meets the needs of a wide spectrum of people. Clients seen by counselors have developmental or situational concerns that require help in regard to adjustment or remediation. Their problems often require short-term intervention, but occasionally treatment may be extended to encompass disorders included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (1994) of the American Psychiatric Association.
- *Counseling is theory based.* Counselors draw from a number of theoretical approaches, including those that are cognitive, affective, behavioral, and systemic. These theories may be applied to individuals, groups, and families.
- *Counseling is a process that maybe developmental or intervening.* Counselors focus on their clients' goals. Thus, counseling involves both choice and change. In some cases, "counseling is a rehearsal for action" (Casey, 1996, p. 176)

Source: Gladding, S.T. (2004). **Counseling: A Comprehensive Profession (5th edition)**. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall. P 6-7.