



## Developing your skills



# Advice and Counselling Skills

The speed and complexity of modern life continue to increase as do people's expectations from it. Particularly important for adult students returning to education, being able to cope well with the new environment requires autonomous and flexible thinking and clear decisions. Being able to advise and counsel students about learning opportunities available to them may help them to think things through for themselves and make their own decisions, free of the effects of any barriers to progression. These notes are not intended to provide training in any form of counselling, but only to raise staff awareness about the subject and how simple techniques can be used to better engage with potential students.

## WHAT ARE COUNSELLING SKILLS?

In this context, the primary function of offering advice and counselling is to help potential students think clearly about their situation. It's your job to help the potential students to feel safe enough to open up with you about their thoughts and feelings. But in order to do so, they need to feel respected and understood. You should not approach the task of giving advice as if it were a rational exercise based on your technical knowledge and expertise. In fact giving advice is almost never a logical process. In order to be an effective advisor, you must learn to recognise, deal with and respond to student's emotions. It is not enough for you to be *right*, you must be *helpful*!!

In many ways counselling skills are similar to those of great teaching. Your task is to help a student get from point A (what they know, understand and believe now) to point B (a state of deeper understanding and knowledge). To achieve this you must have a

good understanding of the point at which the student is starting from. What do they understand now? What do they believe, and why do they believe it? What are they doing now, and why are they doing it that way? This understanding can only come from doing a lot of questioning and listening.

Having understood point A, you cannot jump straight into a discussion of point B, the end point. The second required skill is to develop a step-by-step reasoning process that takes the student on a journey of discovery. The goal is to influence their understanding so that, eventually, the student says, "*You know, on reflection I think that B is a better answer!*" You can then respond, "*OK, that's what we'll do!*" This process is generally accomplished by using the following types of questions:

- *Why do you think you have X problem?*
- *What options do you have?*
- *What advantages do you foresee in using different options?*
- *Other students encounter Y difficulties when they try that. What can we do to prevent such things from occurring?*
- *What benefits might result if we tried the following approach?*

This process does take a great deal of patience. You may be tempted to scream out, "*But the answer is clear, you should do B! Listen to me!*" This would be an entirely intellectually correct answer but a complete failure in advice-giving!!

The most effective way to win influence over a student is to make him or her think that the solution was his or her idea, or at the very least, his or her decision. One way to do this is to help the student understand all the available options by conducting a thorough exploration of all advantages and disadvantages. You can then gently guide the



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student to the preferred solution. Notice that this usually means avoiding the temptation to take a stand yourself early in the process.

### FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS

Excellence in giving advice requires not only the right attitude but a careful attention to language. There are always a number of ways of expressing the same thought, each of which differs in how it is received by the listener.

Saying, *"You've got to do X,"* even when you're correct, is very likely to evoke emotional resistance - no one likes to be told that they've got to do anything. It is usually better to say something like this: *"Let's go through the options together. These are the ones I see. Can you think of anything else we should consider? Now let's go through the pros and cons of each course of action. Based on these pros and cons, action X seems the most likely to work, doesn't it? Or can you think of a better solution?"* If the student doesn't want to do X, the conversation is still alive. If you've said *"You've got to do X,"* and the student says, *"No, I don't,"* you've nowhere to go. Numerous other examples of "hard" and "soft" phrasing can be given.

For example, take something as simple as *"What are your problems?"* Seemingly a simple question, it can easily be taken as challenging. A good substitute might be, *"What is most in need of improvement?"* As a quick rule of thumb, it is usually better to try to turn one's assertions into questions. Instead of saying, *"This is the best solution,"* try the following: *"Other students usually do*

*X for the following reasons. Do you think that applies here?"* What all this shows is that we aren't always aware of how we are coming across in our conversations with students. You know what we intend to convey, but you do not always know how we are being received.

You must	So that the student can
Listen carefully	Develop his/her thinking
Build a relationship of trust and respect	Feel safe and respected
Pay attention	Know you care
Accept the student's feelings	Know he/she is not being judged
Understand the student's feelings.	Know you are with him/her
Think about the student	Get the best help possible
Ask questions to clarify the situation	Develop her/his own thinking
Give advice and encouragement	Help students to look at options and find solutions
Summarise	Hear her/his thoughts and know she/he is understood.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

- [Learn Direct](#)
- [Mind Tools](#)
- [Tools for Communication](#)
- [Conversation as communication](#)