Counselling skills have been one of the most exciting and influential developments in a wide variety of helping relationships. We have learnt from the feedback to previous editions that this book has attracted a wider audience than those engaged in professional counselling practice. A wide range of caring professions including medicine and nursing, social work, human resource management, and pastoral care in schools and religious communities has successfully applied the insights associated with counselling skills. These skills are also widely used in the rapidly developing fields of life-coaching and mentoring. Although most of the known applications of counselling skills tend to be professional relationships, they are also used in voluntary and less formal settings. We have heard of counselling skills being used to help to train people, often young people, in a variety of peer support schemes. One of the reasons why the co-author of later editions, Tim Bond, was keen to be involved in writing this book is because of his experience of training people in the use of counselling skills in health care, education and community groups. This new edition has been written to take account of the wide range of potential applications for using counselling skills.

However, neither of us has wanted to lose sight of the significance of counselling skills to professional counselling training. Skills training is a required component of most training in counselling, psychotherapy and applied psychology. As the name indicates, ‘counselling skills’ have their origins in the evolution of counselling. They were developed in response to a quest for what distinguished the effective from the less-effective
practitioner. It was realised that, in order to be competent, counsellors required more than emotional insight and a relevant pool of knowledge; they also needed to be able to communicate effectively. Feelings, insight and knowledge have little impact unless they can be articulated. This realisation has expanded the focus of attention beyond the content of the communication to the process; it’s not simply what you communicate but how you communicate. One of the pioneering studies that informed the development of counselling skills analysed and described the microskills used by counsellors in the United States (Truax and Carkhuff, 1967). Many other studies have built on this work by developing strategies and recommended combinations of skills to assist with both problem-solving and enhancing social competence. One of the characteristics of these later developments in counselling skills is that, while they frequently had their origins in attempts to address issues that arose in counselling and for training counsellors, they have also since been recognised as applying more widely to a variety of helping relationships. They are useful in many different contexts (Aldridge et al., 2001), in nursing (Tschudin, 1995; Freshwater, 2003), teaching (King, 1999), social work (Miller, 2006), church and faith work (Ross, 2003) and management, human relationships and therapy (Egan, 2006). We are continuing in this tradition of recognising that counselling skills have many applications.

When we reflected on our own experience of counselling skills, we realised that we drew heavily upon them in a wide variety of different types of roles and relationships. Sue has worked extensively in the corporate sector delivering skills training for both line and human resources managers; she also coaches and mediates as well as supports those who have been subjected to harassment and bullying. Tim is an experienced counsellor who led a student counselling service before becoming a lecturer and is currently head of a large university department. He uses counselling skills in both academic and personal tutorials as well as in his research and consultancy concerning professional ethics. He finds the skills particularly useful as a manager when working with colleagues to problem solve, or supporting staff in challenging situations. With this wide range of applications, we have needed to find words that identify the users of counselling skills and the person being helped. There are no totally satisfactory role labels but we have decided to follow the latest practice in the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. We are using the term ‘practitioner’ for the user of counselling skills, and hope that the reader will substitute a more role-appropriate label if this is required.
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For the same reasons we are using the term ‘client’ for the recipient of counselling skills. Again, some readers may wish to substitute a term that is more appropriate to the context in which they practise.

Counselling along with many other types of helping relationships shares a number of challenges that can be greatly helped by the use of counselling skills. This book is structured around a straightforward theoretical framework that provides a ‘template’ for guiding and shaping the process from initiation to closure by:

1. **Establishing an appropriate relationship:** The foundations of counselling skills direct our attention to how we develop, sustain and evaluate relationships; to the impact of non-verbal communication; and to the interpersonal skills typically used in everyday problem-solving.

2. **Constructing a way of working together that is focused on addressing specific problems or issues:** The beginning or foundation skills mark out this way of helping as being essentially different from everyday conversation. The skills provide the means for establishing a shared understanding about the purpose of talking together, of exploring and gathering information in ways that facilitate mutual understanding of the concerns of the person wanting help.

3. **Discovering new ways of seeing the problem or issue that empowers the person affected:** Simply sharing the problem may not be sufficient in itself. Some may need the further help of a variety of considered challenges and inputs that open up new and better possibilities.

4. **Supporting the implementation of any actions required to resolve the issue presented:** The gap between talking in a supportive relationship and putting a plan into action in what may be less supportive circumstances can seem daunting. Counselling skills offer strategies for helping someone to make the transition from words to action.

5. **Challenging situations that can arise when using counselling skills:** One of the sources of perpetual interest in using counselling skills is that every person and issue is different. A successful practitioner typically has a high tolerance of uncertainty as the helping process unfolds together with a readiness to respond to the unexpected. Some preparation for responding to surprising and challenging situations helps to develop confidence. It also enhances the practitioner’s capacity to keep potentially overwhelming situations contained and safe for both the person being helped and themselves.

In our experience, the idea of stages is beneficial to learning and applying these skills. Stages provide a kind of navigation aid for the practitioner in identifying what strategies and skills might be relevant. The actual practice of using counselling skills is invariably not so well ordered. The
person seeking help is neither required to read about counselling skills nor to have trained in them. They are not required to fit the textbook. They may present their story in any way they like, even if this changes or complicates the sequence of the stages. Nevertheless, to be able to respond to the potential complexity of using counselling skills, it is best to become familiar with the stages as they are presented in Chapters 4–6.

Distinguishing counselling from other ways of helping

The wide range of potential applications of counselling skills to different ways of helping makes them a valuable asset and well worth learning. The range of applications is endless. You can use them to support a friend with problems, help a colleague decide whether to stop smoking, respond to an indecisive customer, clarify what is troubling someone who wants to make a complaint and for a multitude of other purposes. They can be used in an enormous variety of settings, ranging from informal ones like the home and social groups to more formally structured contexts like voluntary, commercial or statutory organisations. A good grasp of counselling skills is an enormous asset in human resource management and any type of caring role.

However, all assets can also become problematic. Counselling skills are no exception. The many different applications of counselling skills may become a source of potential confusion that frustrates the user and confuses the recipient of whatever type of service is being offered.

For example, a teacher may be in the process of disciplining a pupil for not doing any homework. The pupil reveals for the first time that her parents have just separated and she has to look after younger brothers and sisters so that her mother can go to work. The teacher is genuinely shocked not to have known this and changes her approach from reprimanding to using counselling skills to learn about the new circumstances and to help the pupil consider the choices open to her. The teacher is an experienced welfare tutor and adept in counselling skills. The pupil desperately wants to find a source of support and understanding. The switch from being ‘told off’ to being ‘cared for’ confuses her and leaves her feeling vulnerable. She feels a strong urge to tell everything that troubles her, but how far should she go? If she starts to say how much she misses her dad, will she be able to stop herself from saying how she mistrusts her mother’s new boyfriend?
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who has made sexual advances to her, and how she worries when her younger brothers and sisters are left unsupervised? Will the teacher help her to think things through or insist on bringing in the authorities? This is the sort of situation most teachers and many pupils will recognise. The awkward start to the conversation can be confusing not only for the pupil but also the teacher. The teacher’s change in purpose from punishment to care makes it much more difficult to achieve a positive outcome. If the pupil remains sullenly silent, not only has she lost the opportunity for help but also failed to address the importance of failing to do homework. If the pupil responds to the empathy and ‘tells all’, will she later regret it and feel betrayed by what she may have experienced as manipulative techniques? Throughout, the teacher is well-intentioned towards the pupil; but the lack of clarity over her role, purpose and intent may create the very mistrust that she is striving to avoid. Similar confusions can arise in health care, unless the boundaries between a clinician offering expert opinion and facilitating a patient making a decision about future health care are clearly signalled. The effective use of counselling skills requires the practitioner to be clear about the purpose of the conversation with the person being helped, in order to avoid misunderstandings that might inhibit the client or lead to inappropriate expectations. One way of avoiding any confusion is to communicate clearly the purpose of the conversation and to say when the purpose changes or moves into a different stage in the helping relationship.

Another potential source of confusion exists in the distinction between formal counselling and using counselling skills. This distinction can be extremely significant in some contexts. For example, counselling skills can be used to advantage by almost anyone to offer support to a colleague in the workplace. In this context, one of the potential sources of confusion is whether the help is being offered to further the organisation’s aims or those of the person receiving help. Good practice in counselling skills demands clarity about whose aims are being served. However, this alone does not transform using counselling skills into formal counselling.

Formal counselling is increasingly recognised as a professional role with its own distinctive requirements, practices and systems of accountability. Table 1.1 summarises some of the key features that distinguish offering supportive help enhanced by counselling skills from formal counselling. Reputable counselling will be provided under the auspices of a professional body, such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, governed by ethical guidelines and supported by
non-managerial supervision. Training in counselling skills is often a first step towards becoming a counsellor; but should not be confused with the extensive and professionally validated training that is stipulated for counsellors.

The rewards of learning counselling skills

Learning counselling skills can be an immensely rewarding and enjoyable experience. Lifelong friendships have developed between course
participants as they share their own life experiences in skills practice sessions. We have both had experience of highly knowledgeable professionals who have found renewed personal commitment and satisfaction in their work as they have developed better ways of communicating and relating.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of learning counselling skills is the way it opens up the possibility of reaching beyond the limits of one’s own life to hearing how other others experience their lives. Hearing how differently people approach the inevitable challenges of relationships, work and leisure and discovering where they find a sense of meaning and purpose is an immense privilege. It can be a life-changing experience, inspiring and at times deeply moving. It can also be humbling to be working with someone who is coping with situations better than we might do, if the positions were to be reversed. Many years of working in our respective range of roles has taught both of us an appreciation of the struggle that life entails for most people. It has also fostered a deep respect for the resilience, courage and resourcefulness of our clients. Using counselling skills can be a life-enhancing activity. It can result in you receiving at least as much as you give, although this may not be the reason why you started.

This book will primarily be concerned with understanding the purpose of various counselling skills and how to acquire and use the relevant techniques. This focus on techniques is inevitable in a book on this topic; however, we don’t want to lose sight of the presence and influence of the person using these techniques. Intentionally or otherwise, you will be using your own life experience to inform your decisions about choosing one strategy over another.

Essential to learning counselling skills and integrating them into your personal counselling style is the process of self-evaluation and personal review. It is frequently a powerful and absorbing learning experience. Therefore we decided to open this book by looking behind the techniques and to invite you to consider what you are bringing to your work with your clients, the ethics of undertaking this role, and to prepare you for the learning process.

Using your personal resourcefulness and experience

Helping another person effectively is a surprisingly complex matter. We can easily become so absorbed in the challenge of trying to understand
what is being communicated that we lose sight of how the client experiences the process. They may not be aware of the skills that you are using. They may look behind the techniques and focus their attention on their sense of you as a person, gauging whether you can be trusted with their intimate thoughts and whether you will be able to help them. One way into self-understanding is to reflect on our own life story. Knowing how you have responded to the challenges in your life will help you to understand why you prefer some strategies and skills to others. It will help you to identify your strengths and the resources that you can draw upon when using counselling skills.

We have produced a list of questions that you may find useful to return to from time to time for personal reflection or discussion.

- What has helped you?
- What challenges have you faced in your life?
- How far have you resolved these challenges?
- What sorts of interventions from other people have helped or hindered?
- What did you do that helped or hindered?
- What have you learned from these experiences that will inform how you help other people?
- What strengths and resources will you bring to your use of counselling skills?
- What are the things you want to develop?

You may want to keep a note of your responses to these questions. Some of your answers may change as you learn counselling skills. Being aware of these changes will extend your self-awareness.

**Being ethical**

Counselling skills can be extremely powerful and using them can elicit information from people that might not otherwise have been disclosed. Using these skills also places the practitioner in a very powerful and influential position. They are of course skills that can be applied for many purposes. For example, some of the techniques are also used in investigations, disciplinary hearings and cross-examination. Some of the strategies and skills are also used in direct selling and marketing, most notably in the rapport-building phase and bringing the sale to a conclusion. The diversity of ways and the contexts in which they can be deployed emphasises the significance of ethical awareness in their use.
For example, would it be ethical for a human resources manager to use counselling skills, in order to acquire sensitive and confidential information from an employee for the purpose of building a case to retire that employee early? Would knowing that the employee wants to continue working make using counselling skills to impose early retirement more or less ethical? Would the use of counselling skills in order to influence the employee into accepting early retirement be ethical? Would it make a difference to how the human resources manager handled this potential conflict of interests, based on whom they consider to be their client – the employee or the company? Would the employee be better placed to make an informed decision about their future, if the boundaries and purposes are openly presented? Similarly, how ethical would it be for a counselor to use counselling skills in order to satisfy the practitioner’s personal curiosity or professional development requirements rather than to help the client? Does the client’s consent to providing information for these purposes make a difference ethically? How free is a client to withhold consent in the helping relationship, if he or she wishes to continue receiving services? Again, is it ethical for a practitioner to use counselling skills to coerce the client into doing something that the practitioner considers will be helpful, even though the client is unconvinced or resistant? Does it make a difference ethically if the practitioner is striving to prevent the client inflicting irreversible harm on themselves or others?

The answer to some of these questions may vary according to the particular circumstances. Deciding what is ethical can be very problematic in all kinds of helping relationships and will depend on the context, the practitioner’s role, the circumstances and the interpretation of those circumstances. Our willingness to grapple with the ethical dimensions of using counselling skills will influence both our clients’ and colleagues’ opinions about our suitability for this work.

The clients’ views of what is ethical are usually a good starting point, especially in roles where the primary purpose is to offer help. The bare bones of clients’ ethical expectations are often very simple and eminently reasonable. When we have asked clients about their ethical expectations of users of counselling skills, they have usually replied that the practitioner should be:

- trustworthy
- respectful
- competent
- accountable.
Trustworthiness requires taking account of the risk that the client is taking in seeking help. It also requires protecting personally sensitive information disclosed by clients from being used for purposes other than for which it was originally disclosed. Ensuring the integrity of the relationship may require checking whether the practitioner and client share the same aims in working together.

Respectfulness requires a willingness to accept and value differences between people and to act in ways that affirm the client as a person worthy of respect. The challenge for the practitioner is striving to understand and accept difference between people rather than rejecting difference too readily or judging what may seem strange as wrong or unacceptable.

Competence presents a considerable challenge in counselling skills. The appropriate and constructive use of the skills is reasonably easily evaluated. However, the use of the practitioner’s sense of himself or herself as a person, the emotional robustness and the depth of knowledge required to assist clients about specific issues can also be essential aspects of competence. There is clearly an expectation that practitioners will avoid acting beyond their competence or using the skills primarily as an opportunity to resolve their own problems or pursue their own interests. Conflicts of interest can be fatal to trust and can bring services of any kind into disrepute.

Some form of periodic evaluation and support will help the assessment of competence and its further development. Counsellors have developed a form of consultative support or ‘non-managerial’ supervision as a way of achieving this. In the corporate sector, mentoring can be a way of accomplishing these aims. Nonetheless, it is surprising to the authors that so many caring and helping roles leave practitioners largely unsupported and increasingly subject to periodic authoritative inspections. Such inspections often appear to be more concerned with finding incompetence and deficiency than supporting competence. Teaching, social work and health care employ large numbers of personally motivated staff largely unsupported over the difficulties and personal cost of fulfilling their roles. Stress and loss of personal motivation are often the causes of people losing the levels of competence they may have demonstrated earlier in their career.

Accountability to the client involves a willingness to explain how one is working and the reasons for the decisions one has made. In some situations, accountability may extend to colleagues, the funders of services and sometimes other members of the client’s family or social network. It is not unusual for accountability to exist in tension with being trustworthy,
especially when it involves responsibility beyond the client and raises questions of how to honour the client’s confidences. Respect may require that differences in culture are considered in how to be accountable. Some cultures require greater formality or deference by the practitioner than others. To be accountable when you consider that you have been incompetent is a test of courage and humility. The use of apology and expression of regret has its place in accountability, especially if accompanied by changes to prevent future errors. We will be turning again to the issues of trust and respect in the next chapter, when we discuss the core conditions that underpin the use of counselling skills.

A more detailed account of the challenges of being ethical in counselling and psychotherapy can be found in *Standards and Ethics for Counselling in Action* (Bond, 2010).

### The learning process

We have talked about the personal rewards of learning counselling skills. There is often excitement at the beginning and a sense of achievement and fulfilment at the end.

However, what happens in between can be personally challenging. These are not skills that can be learnt as impersonal techniques. They impact on both the learner and on existing relationships. Sometimes this will be beneficial. Good counselling skills can be used to help family members and friends with their difficulties, although you may need to be careful about protecting enough space in which you can relate in other ways. Most partners will enjoy some experimentation in how you communicate with them. As with all experiments, the outcome may be unpredictable. Being empathic and using skills, where you reflect back the important points of what another is saying, may forestall an argument because the other person feels heard. Conversely, it may frustrate them if they were hoping to learn more of your views and experience or to clear the air with an argument. The issues of selecting the appropriate strategies and skills apply just as much to your social contacts as to your relationships with clients. Generally, we like to be more reciprocal and spontaneous with friends and partners than this model envisages with clients. In our experience, you will want to be more considered in your responses to clients than might be the case with established relationships.
The emotional response to learning a skill can be surprisingly powerful. Again this can be captured as stages:

1. **Unconscious incompetence**: We start the learning cycle in a state of blissful ignorance of how we communicate and respond to other people’s problems. We take listening and responding for granted. We have little or no awareness of the potential for improvement.

2. **Conscious incompetence**: This stage marks your beginning consciousness or awareness of how you typically communicate. It is not always a comfortable experience. This stage may be characterised by confusion or by feeling de-skilled. There can be a sense loss of what has been a familiar and unproblematic. There may also be a sense of excitement about new opportunities. However, despite discomfort, this is the turning point where you realise the potential for improvement and look forward to the possibilities offered by new skills.

3. **Conscious competence**: The pursuit of conscious competence will vary in difficulty. Some skills will be relatively easily acquired. Others may be perplexing and difficult to implement. The examples in the book have been chosen to help you familiarise yourself with the skills. You can be greatly helped by having someone who is able to demonstrate them. An experienced tutor in counselling skills is ideal. Alternatively, you can use audio and videotapes to supplement this book.

4. **Unconscious competence**: The completion of the cycle is reached as you become sufficiently confident in your competence such that the newly acquired skill forms part of natural repertoire. The sense of strangeness and artificiality fades. You start to incorporate the new skill into your own way of communicating; and working with progressively less and less conscious awareness. You grow into a state of unconscious incompetence, albeit at an improved level, until you review your practice or want to extend your competence – at which point you start the cycle again.

This cycle will become very familiar to you as you work through this book. In the next chapter we will introduce the model, its structure and stages.