

INITIAL INTERVIEW CHECKLIST INCREASES COUNSELLOR EFFECTIVENESS

JOHN VRIEND

Wayne State University

and

JEFFREY A. KOTTLER

University of North Alabama

Abstract

A structure is described for use by practicing counsellors and trainees to help them systematically conduct initial interviews including all significant data gathering and process component variables. A checklist is suggested as a practical way in which practitioners may sequentially address key points.

Résumé

On décrit une structure que peuvent utiliser les conseillers praticiens et les stagiaires. Elle les aide à réaliser systématiquement les premières entrevues y compris la collecte des données significatives et le traitement des éléments variables. On suggère une liste de contrôle comme moyen pratique par lequel les conseillers pourraient traiter les points saillants en séquence.

Do you know that *every* airline pilot, not just the inexperienced one, consults a long and detailed printed check-off list prior to taking off and landing the aircraft so as not to forget one single operation among the numerous tasks required for the flawless performance of the complex machine at these two most crucial times? Every airline captain does it every time. Nothing is left to chance or a fallible memory. And we, the passengers, are the benefactors.

Similarly mechanics, inspectors, manufacturers, craftsmen, any person dealing with the construction, maintenance, operation, or components of a physical system refers to blueprints, operating manuals, lists of procedures, directions, instructions. Many of those who work in the worlds of business or industry continually rely on such lists. In many people-related work spheres, the same principle exists: teachers make lesson plans and parliamentarians follow the rules of order, accountants and insurance salespersons depend on their forms. What can be listed is listed; what is routine is identified and forms are developed to save time, energy, and error.

Is counselling so unique as operation that it defies the use of such written aids? We think not, and yet we encounter few practitioners, in our roles as counsellor educators and inservice training consultants, who have decided for themselves that such aids are useful or who are willing to use them.

In particular we are thinking of the initial interview, the intake session, where a counsellor must check out a great number of client areas and deliver a number of specific points of information in order to be effective. But, beyond this first encounter, a list of counsellor reminders, notes, references, points related to the ongoing process, could assure greater productivity at any counselling stage.

Why is there this reluctance on the part of counsellors to refer to written aids, once the professional and client meet? After having discussed the reluctance with supervised trainees who resist using such aids, three untested myths of dubious credibility prevail:

- 1) Counselling is a personal experience. To come to the session with lists may give the impression that I am impersonal or see my client as someone who fits into a neat category.
- 2) I may seem to be mechanical, to be going by the book, not an attentive listener fully concerned with the life-space circumstances every client uniquely lives in.
- 3) My client may think I am not adequate, not sufficiently skilled to conduct this session without the crutch of guidelines.

A simple field-testing tends to obviate these spurious ideas and others like them, where counsellors are ostensibly justifying their behavior on the basis of clients' best interests, when in truth

they have put the focus on themselves, how they "come across" to the client. The assumptions behind the rationalizations are skewed or illogically built upon: 1) counselling is no less personal with the introduction of counselling aids; 2) if "going by the book" accelerates counselling effectiveness, why *not* go by the book; being an unconcerned inattentive listener will be demonstrated, not brought on by the use of a checklist; 3) a client will judge inadequate counsellor performance as such when it occurs, lists or no lists. When lists *are* used, counsellors discover that clients are either indifferent to their presence or appreciative of the counsellor's efficiency. Some counsellors simply share the list: "We will be covering these points during this session." Every experienced effective counsellor sooner or later learns to share each rationale and aspect of the counselling process: trust is destroyed, loss of confidence in the counsellor mounts when the counsellor alludes to arcane resources or alchemy beyond client comprehension, as though some specially privileged wizardry exists which only the counsellor's head is large enough to contain.

In many of the various counselling agencies the intake interview is a standardized operating procedure. Specific sorts of client information must be gathered to establish client eligibility for services, for example, and long intake forms are used to gather health histories, employment and educational background, income sources, family constellation information, a plethora of data which more often than not have no bearing on the subsequent counselling. Such data-gathering goes on in every sphere of a citizen's life, whether one seeks credit or opens a bank account, applies for a job or for admission to a school, when one seeks out a physician, a lawyer, an accountant. We are all conditioned and have expectations that the one who services us will collect information in some kind of organized fashion, with or without forms.

Experience with the use of a counsellor checklist has proven that clients not only do not object, they are impressed with the counsellor's thoroughness, with the coverage and attention given to their life-situation, and are pleased that so much went on in the initial interview. When the session is concluded clients know what to expect; they have a cognitive map which helps them to know what they are into, how the counselling will progress.

Counsellors usually have enough on their minds without trying to memorize or recall all the tasks to complete and goals to attain in a first encounter with a client. There is so *much* to do. Helping a client to feel safe, at ease; collecting background information relative to the client's presented concerns; gauging client functioning levels; discussing confidentiality; defining counselling operationally, identifying both counsellor and

client work and roles; securing a counselling commitment; the list of tasks and goals goes on, and the time span is always too short. Veteran counsellors who have been through hundreds of initial interviews are hardpressed to remember to touch all the bases. Interruptions, communication styles, emotions, compulsions to dwell on irrelevant material or overtalk continuously sidetrack the flow of action, distort the neat picture of humane efficiency the counsellor has imagined during preplanning. When such occurs, there is for the veteran as well as the neophyte no greater comfort than the realization that one has a trusty "cheat sheet" at hand with cues for appropriate courses of action, a rescuing resource.

Constructing a checklist is a personal endeavor, depending on a counsellor's orientation, counselling style, and criteria for what ought ideally to transpire in the first counselling session. On the basis of our own experience we have identified basic initial interview components which we consider vital to effective performance in launching a counselling relationship and contracting for accountable service delivery. The merit of these components and the greater or lesser value of others is not at issue here; we assume that every counsellor would have a similar or different list; they simply form the substance of our checklist model.

We see the following fifteen as essential first interview components. (A full explication and justification for the inclusion of each is given in Vriend and Dyer, 1974, the source of our list.)

- 1) Opening the interview.
- 2) Assessing the reason for coming to counselling.
- 3) Assessing previous counselling experience.
- 4) Assessing client counselling expectations.
- 5) Delivering a clear definition of counselling.
- 6) Describing the nature of confidentiality.
- 7) Searching for meaningful counselling content.
- 8) Assessing client ability to function.
- 9) Labeling what feelings are.
- 10) Determining a counselling structure.
- 11) Obtaining a commitment to counselling.
- 12) Working on goal-setting.
- 13) Summarizing, reviewing, and evaluating.
- 14) Using psychological homework.
- 15) Closing the interview.

Not specifically identified above but an essential part of an initial interview, we feel, is the introduction of some actual counselling content, the client then being able to experience what the process entails, to have a taste of things to come, as it

were. Thus, we find a counsellor reminder list of the steps in the counselling process to be of value:

- 1) Exploration to locate self-defeating thinking, feeling, and doing behaviors.
- 2) Identifying and labeling such behaviors.
- 3) Providing insight by helping the client to understand why such behaviors have perseverated, what the pay-offs have been.
- 4) Helping client to decide to change based on dissatisfaction with old pay-offs.
- 5) Identification of alternate self-enhancing behaviors.
- 6) Setting goals to adopt behavioral alternatives.
- 7) Practicing new behaviors, in the counselling, if possible.
- 8) Detailing psychological homework to practice between sessions.
- 9) Evaluation.

The two line-ups given above are already reduced to a shorthand form, but our actual checklist is briefer yet, as only prompters are needed. Our "cheat sheet" takes the form of a small three-by-five inch card, reproduced below:

COMPONENTS

- 1) Opening
- 2) Reason
- 3) Former counselling
- 4) Expectations
- 5) Couns. defined
- 6) Confidentiality
- 7) Content search
- 8) Functioning
- 9) Labeling
- 10) Structure
- 11) Commitment
- 12) Goals
- 13) Summarizing and evaluating
- 14) Psychological Homework
- 15) Closing

STEPS

- 1) Exploration
- 2) Identifying and labeling
- 3) Giving insight: pay-offs
- 4) Decision
- 5) Alternate behaviors
- 6) Setting goals
- 7) Practicing
- 8) Psychological homework
- 9) Evaluation

As with every fresh endeavor, style and grace of execution are not immediately to be expected. As one works with a checklist, one becomes more at ease, more natural. It is enough for some counsellors to cast only occasional glances, just as they attend to the clock to note the time remaining. For others the emphasis of a penciled checkmark for each area covered works better. Pacing in the first session is always a paramount counsellor responsibility, and familiarity with a checklist helps to guarantee an unhurried but efficient pace. While it is difficult to conceive of the stages of the counselling process being effectively reordered, our components for the first interview seldom are translated into action in the order listed. Nor are we or those we have trained always successful in achieving every counselling goal the list implicitly implies. If commitment to the counselling is secured, the exploratory phase continues in subsequent interviews and the first session components missed are included later. Last, but certainly not the least of virtues, a checklist such as we have here presented is an invaluable asset in constructing useful post-interview counsellor notes.

Reference

- Vriend, J., & Dyer, W.W. Vital components in conducting the initial counselling interview. *Educational Technology*, October, 1974. Reprinted in *Counselling Techniques That Work* by the same authors. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1977.