

What I've learned through my career as a counsellor

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THE TRAINING AND work of the counsellor is informed by a range of theoretical approaches to human development and change. In my experience, effective counselling is guided by each client's unique circumstances while being informed by, rather than dictated by, psychological theories.

Average attendance at counselling in Ireland is 5 – 8 sessions. Sources of counselling services include the HSE, family doctors, low-cost community services and private practitioners. While the process of counselling is subtly different for each person, the overall benefits are multiple and well-proven.

Topics discussed cover all aspects of life and regularly include career decisions, parenting, separation, bereavement, spirituality, work problems, bullying, sexuality, finances, caring for relatives, family conflicts, ageing and so on.

Some themes that have emerged in my counselling work:

1. People are different – from each other and from what the books say.

There are many useful perspectives related to understanding people, but the “textbook case” is rare, if not non-existent. Everybody relates differently and endless misunderstandings result from people automatically assuming that their own perceptions are universal.

For the counsellor, accepting and understanding that a client's opinions and feelings are their genuine perceptions of reality is the key to really listening. People sometimes come to counselling just because they have no-one who simply has the time to listen.

2. As we are all different, we also have different needs.

It is easy to be convinced that if we have enough money, we can buy everything we need, including happiness. But this does not reflect the general experience of many of my clients. For instance, certain parts of the brain, related to feelings of **safety, belonging and meaning**, are stimulated by things like the smiling human face, eye contact, caring touch, the human voice,

gentle attention, laughter, kindness and affection. These can never be bought, sold or commercialised and therefore exist outside the monetary register.

Knowing what our needs actually are (as opposed to what the culture and people around us tell us that they should be), then finding effective and appropriate ways to get these needs met, can be an important part of the counselling journey.

3. Being different also means that each person needs to find work that suits them.

Many people are flexible and can fit comfortably into a variety of occupational situations. But if someone who has a natural talent as a playwright, an artist or a footballer tries to conform to a more traditional 9-to-5 role, they can develop symptoms of stress, leading to anxiety and depression.

Suitable work enhances knowledge and skills development, self-esteem and a sense of belonging to society. Counselling often focusses on the client's occupational interests and ambitions and how these can be practically fulfilled.

4. The head and the heart are equally important.

Sigmund Freud, the originator of psychoanalysis, said that the two great challenges in life were work (the head) and love (the heart) – both requiring two quite different skills sets.

Ideally, work is a satisfying expression of our talents, where we get to make our mark on the world, gaining recognition through mastery and accomplishment. Love, on the other hand, often requires us to put the ego, meaning our own personal wants and needs, aside and be there for other people.

Traditionally the former (work and achievement) was the domain of men and the latter (love and relationships) that of women. Now these boundaries are less rigid, demanding more of us all, but also offering the potential for greater personal fulfillment. Notwithstanding many teething issues, both the home and the workplace have become enriched by a sharing of male and female roles and responsibilities.

As individuals, developing both these sides of ourselves means we become more psychologically rounded and flexible and have a wider range of resources to draw on in times of stress.

5. The fundamental connection between mental and physical health is not fully recognised.

Appropriate nutrition, sleep and exercise underpin the optimal functioning of the nervous system, which is the hardware that we use to run the software of our emotional life. It is a dynamic system: the brain produces millions of chemical reactions every second and like any system, if we feed it with poor quality fuel, it will not function at its best.

The only “fuel” for the nervous system is oxygen and the nutrients in the food we eat. For the first time in our long evolutionary history, the artificially processed foods of modern culture have exposed the human body and brain to additives, colourings, refined sugar, hydrogenated fats and preservatives. Industrial processing also means that organic nutrients and trace elements are stripped out of the food, leaving many people’s brains deprived of important nutrition.

The powerful link between nutrition and mental health is reflected in the growing interest in Nutrient Therapy which is used to successfully treat many conditions. Research also demonstrates that healthy, natural sleep patterns are essential to allow the brain to literally repair itself. Similarly, appropriate exercise releases feel-good endorphins, raising mood and energy levels.

Adapting to a more nutritious diet, getting regular sleep and adequate exercise can often go a long way to alleviating clients’ distressing emotional and psychological symptoms.

6. Meditation and mindfulness are helpful.

By developing our awareness and self-knowledge, meditation and mindfulness have an integrating effect on the personality, helping transcend and heal disturbing inner conflicts and contradictions. These practices help calm turbulent emotions and bring clarity to the mind.

When clients commit to a daily practice of mindfulness and/or meditation, they tend to progress more quickly through counselling.

7. Compassion is an underused word in people’s vocabulary.

Self-compassion means treating ourselves as we would another who is suffering, with kindness and non-judgemental understanding. People tend to judge themselves mercilessly for their perceived failures and shortcomings; adopting a compassionate view allows them to see the common humanity of imperfection and let past mistakes go.

Learning to have compassion for others, including those who have hurt, rejected and betrayed us, is also liberating. It allows us rise above the painful residue of negative emotions that can otherwise hold us back from enjoying life and developing our true capacities.

8. People want to manifest their best selves.

Psychologist Carl Rogers recognised that everyone has an inherent urge to “actualise” – to fulfill the potential for authenticity, creativity and self-expression that we are all born with. Given the correct conditions of supportive, non-judgemental attention, this impulse will naturally manifest and guide the progress of the person in a healthy and productive manner.

This is the evolutionary journey that we are all ultimately on – from self-absorption, negativity and ineffectiveness, into the ability to grow and develop, to have wisdom and awareness, to love

and contribute, each in our unique way. People conceptualise this journey in many different ways, whether personal, religious, spiritual, scientific or secular; counselling provides a roadmap and a set of practical tools that can be adapted to individual needs and world-views.

The universality of the many themes that present across the different groups of clients who attend counselling demonstrates the inspiring fact that ultimately, despite our apparent differences, we have more in common than divides us.

*Maeve's recent publication, [How to be Happy and Healthy: the Seven Natural Elements of Mental Health](#), is available from local bookshops and on www.amazon.co.uk
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