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## Getting Started

### *Using Your Natural Interest and Curiosity About People*

#### Introduction

You have been drawn to the helping professions because of some innate interest in how people behave, and also because of your natural inclination to do this kind of work. Perhaps you have been told you're a good listener, or you find yourself to be someone to whom people typically turn when there are problems. Maybe you grew up in a home where there were difficulties, and you learned how to "read" people as a strategy to keep things as safe as possible. It's possible that your life experiences have given you some very good intuitive skills that help you to see to the heart of the issues that people talk about, and you can respond in ways that are effective and even therapeutic.

All of these things taken together represent the best of what you'll be able to offer your clients. Your natural listening skills, your interest in what people have to say, and your cumulative life experience will serve as the foundation for how you will approach this work. They are the best things you have to offer your client.

The textbook that accompanies this manual, *The Essential Counselor*, presents many skills that you will be able to use in your work. Never lose sight of the fact, however, that it is your own self—you as a person—and your "wisdom" about life, that will drive the skills you use. Your basic assumptions about the nature of people and the theoretical ways you approach your work will help you in your work, as well.

Your course of study will undoubtedly state the importance of empathy as a single most important ingredient in the counseling process. Your ability to see the world through the eyes of another, to imagine with a high degree of accuracy what it would be like to be this other person, is what it means to be empathic. You will best be able to do this when you bring all of your life experience into the counseling space with you. The more of life you have experienced, the more you'll be able to accurately identify with your clients. This doesn't mean that you'll talk about these experiences of yours, but rather that these experiences will serve to help you understand what goes on for your client. This is why helping professionals who have a rich life history—including all of the good, bad, and ugly things that have been a part of their lives—are probably in the best position to provide this understanding.

The word “empathy” is closely related to the concept of “compassion.” Both words have their root meanings in Latin words which roughly mean “suffering with another.” This is what we do when we hear stories of abuse and trauma, of heartbreak and of loss . . . we suffer with another. Perhaps you will have some words of wisdom, or some suggestions that will help someone heal from the wounds she has endured, but the simple fact of your “suffering with” presence will, of itself, be primarily helpful.

## Reflection Exercises: Your Natural Helping Foundation

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The following set of reflection exercises is designed to help you articulate the experiences, the beliefs, the motivations, and natural skills you bring to this helping work.

The Reflection Exercises each begin with a set of questions. Try to be as honest with yourself as possible as you consider each of these. There are no right or wrong answers to these, rather they are meant to help you clearly articulate where you stand and what you think about some critical issues that will ultimately affect your work.

The first of these Reflection Exercises suggests that you do a brief life review. It will prompt you to look at the events and people who have influenced your decisions to become a counselor.

The second Reflection Exercise asks you to look at your underlying assumptions about the essential nature of people and what constitutes a healthy person. These assumptions, naturally, will impact how you approach the people you’re counseling.

Finally, the last Reflection Exercise will ask you to review your natural helping skills, the set of personal characteristics and skills you think will benefit your work. You can, of course, also include in this review the things about which you have the most to learn.

When you have completed these reflection exercises and written about the influence of your life experience and beliefs on your future counseling work, you may be sharing this with one of your student peers or your instructor. You don’t want to be writing about things that would unduly embarrass you. Perhaps you could write about those things in a language that only you would understand, or simply use euphemisms to describe particularly difficult experiences (e.g., “a tough time as a sophomore in high school”).







## Role Play: Using Your Natural Skills

*The Essential Counselor* outlines a lab practice model for role plays. In this model, there is a client, a counselor, and either one or two observers. You can review that model in the text and use it here, if it seems suitable. Alternatively, you could work with one other student, taking turns as counselor and client, or with a friend or relative, if another student is not available. If you are working with observers, their job is to remain silent during the role play, to keep time, and then to provide feedback at the end of the role play.

When you are in the client role (where another student or friend is being the counselor) you will talk about the reflections you've written about—your life experiences, your values and beliefs, and your natural helping skills—with the counselor. Talk about those things that feel safe. Do not feel compelled to share aspects of your life or beliefs that feel uncomfortable to talk about; those could be saved for discussion in your own personal counseling, not this skills training course.

Given that you most likely will not have time to discuss all that you've written, you can pick and choose to talk about those things that seem most relevant and best to talk about at this starting out point in this course. Take 20 minutes for this, and then spend 5 minutes talking with the person who served as your counselor about how this went. If there is an observer, that person can also share perspectives on the discussion.

Then the configuration shifts, where you switch roles, or where you rotate roles, if you've been working with one or two observers. When you are in the counseling role, you will want to do all you can to help your "client" talk about his/her life experiences, beliefs, and personal characteristics and natural skills. Use all of those natural skills you identified to help the other feel comfortable enough to talk and to draw him or her out.

Take time after each 20 minute role play to discuss it, particularly focusing on those things the counselor did that seemed to be most effective in moving the conversation along.

Remember that information that is shared in this, or any, role play should be held confidentially unless there is an explicit understanding that it is okay to talk about it with others. Naturally, if you are concerned about anyone's safety related to information that's been shared, you'll want to discuss that with your instructor. Safety trumps confidentiality.

When the role plays and discussion of them are completed, note some final comments and reflections in the space provided below. Then fill out the personal assessment question and comment section that follows. Finally, swap your assessment with a student colleague or give it to your instructor. This other person can add his thoughts to your assessment, and you may be reviewing his.

### Comments About the Role Plays:

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**Concluding Personal Assessment: Personal Life Experiences, Beliefs, and Natural Skills and Characteristics**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Which of the following statements best reflects how clearly you have articulated your experiences, beliefs, and skills? Circle one:

- 1. I believe that I quite thoroughly understand my experiences, beliefs, and natural skills . . . and I know that I will be able to use them in my work with clients.
- 2. I understand these experiences, beliefs, and natural skills, but am not sure about how well I'll be able to use them in my counseling work.
- 3. I'm still pretty unclear about what my beliefs and skills are all about, and I'm not sure about how to use them.

**Comments:**

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**Concluding Peer and/or Instructor Assessment: Personal Life Experiences, Beliefs, and Natural Skills and Characteristics**

Which of the following statements best reflects how clearly he/she has articulated his/her experiences, beliefs, and natural skills? Circle one:

- 1. I believe that he/she quite thoroughly understands his/her experiences, beliefs, and natural skills . . . and I know that he/she will be able to use them in his/her work with clients.
- 2. He/she understands these experiences and natural skills, but I am not sure about how well he/she will be able to use them in his/her counseling work.
- 3. He/she is still pretty unclear about what his/her beliefs and skills are all about, and I'm not sure how he/she will use them.

**Reviewer Name** \_\_\_\_\_