

# The Ethics of Helping<sup>1</sup>

## What is *Helping*?

*Helping* is any conversation held with the explicit purpose of improving someone's situation, in which one person is clearly understood to be the *helper*.

Helping can be distinguished from *counselling*, *casework* or *therapy*, because:

- It generally occurs in a more casual or informal situation.
- It does not assume an ongoing or regular supportive relationship.
- It does not require the helper to delve deeply into the psychological history and problems of the client.
- It does not assume the psychological expertise of the helper.
- The helper does not have any legal authority to direct or control the client.

The following outlines key principles of ethical helping, and some of the ways these principles are applied in Community Services practice.

## Ethical Helping Interactions are ...

... **Respectful.** (Treating your involvement in a client's life as a *privilege* rather than a *right*.)

- **Do no further harm.** Clients generally ask for help at a point in their life when they are having problems. They may even have experienced, or be experiencing, real harm. They are therefore more vulnerable to suggestion than at other times. It is important that helpers recognise their responsibility not to abuse their power of suggestion, in order to meet their own interest rather than those of the client.
- **Assume the client's goodwill.** Sometimes clients can behave in a way that helpers find difficult – seeming to withdraw from the helper; seeming to be critical of the helper; seeming to be disinterested in doing anything to change their situation. In fact, these might be very natural reactions – to anxiety about change; to shame about needing help; to embarrassment about telling someone their problems. If they

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<sup>1</sup> © Copyright Suzi Quixley 1999 & 2008 (revised). It is largely based on ideas from 2 sources:

- Egan, Gerard (1998) **The Skilled Helper: A Problem-Management Approach to Helping**, Sixth Edition, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Pacific Grove, California, USA
- Quixley, Suzi (1995) **A 'Power With' Approach to Short Term Helping**, Revised Edition, ESSQ, Adelaide, South Australia

originally came to you to talk, it is reasonable to assume that, deep down, the client wants to deal with their problem.

- **Do not rush to judgment.** Your first assumption about the client's behaviour, or the nature of their problem, or the viability of their ideas for solutions, might be quite wrong. The word *judgment* tends to be used in two different ways. It can be useful for helpers to make *informed assessments* (or *judgments*) of clients, and test these tentative conclusions with the client. It's very important that helpers are not **critical** (or *judgmental*) about clients, drawing negative conclusions or *putting down* the client.
- **Always act in the client's interest.** Time spent with the client is *theirs*. Whilst sometimes it might be useful to tell them something about your life (self disclosure) or even share a problem with them, the measure of whether or not this is ethically appropriate to a particular situation, is your motivation for doing it. Is it for them? Or for you? It's not the responsibility of clients to listen to your stories or help you solve your problems ... you are being paid to help them!

... **Client-Centred.** (Enabling clients to take as much responsibility for their lives, and the process of change, as possible.)

- **Understand and value the individual.** Place the needs of the client above all other considerations. Even if you think you understand the client already, try and put this aside and focus on the way they present themselves. You may be surprised ... often people are very different from how they first appear! Just because something about them is familiar, this doesn't mean you really understand them. Listening to people, and working from the way they choose to present themselves, makes them feel valued. Assuming that they are *like* other people in *their group* (however you categorise them) can make them feel unimportant or devalued.
- **Make it clear that you are 'for' the client.** Keep the client's agenda in focus. You are there to serve them, and their priorities, not to impose yours. Whilst there are always two sides to any story, your job is to help the person who is your client. It is important that you work from their perspective or *stand in their shoes* and imagine how things might feel for them, rather than taking the imaginary side of the other person in the situation. Your client should feel that you are walking alongside them; that you are on their side; that you are sharing their journey with them.
- **Do not impose your solutions to client's problems.** Clients are key experts on their own lives. Situations are always more complex than a client can possibly describe in words. You will know from your own experience that someone else's easy *solution*, no matter how logical it sounds, is unlikely to be the answer to your problem.
- **Start with the premise that clients can change if they choose.** Changing things in life is hard and scary. That's why clients may seem to be putting up barriers to change. It is completely valid for a client to explore the possibilities for change, and conclude that *the pain is not worth the gain*. Your job is to help them think through whether they want to take risks, or try a change ... not to judge them if they decide not to, or pressure them to do what you think is best for them.

... **Responsive to Diversity.** (Recognising that multiculturalism is just one aspect of the vast array of differences between human beings and their experiences.)

- **Understand diversity.** Do not define diversity narrowly. We all tend to put people into groups (people with disability, old people, Malaysian people, confident people). We then tend to assume that people in the same group are very similar and therefore experience similar problems. In fact, a client's concern about unattractiveness deserves your engagement as much as their concern about racial intolerance.
- **Recognise and challenge whatever blind spots you may have.** The better you know your own assumptions about different groups in society, the better you can work with people from diverse social groups. You have to know your assumptions in order to be able to put them aside, and genuinely try to understand an individual human being and their experience of life.
- **Tailor your interventions in a diversity-sensitive way.** On the other hand, there are some *informed generalisations*, which might provide a useful starting point to your early interactions with clients. For example, you may be aware that usually people from one culture are likely to be very open about personal details of their life, whereas people from another might be unfamiliar with talking about personal issues. This awareness might influence how you interact with them, until you know this particular individual better, and can assess how best to support them.
- **Avoid cultural stereotyping.** Do not over-generalise. There's a big difference between working from *informed generalisations*, and making cultural assumptions. Very often, cultural stereotypes simply don't hold up to scrutiny, and reflect negative social attitudes toward particular groups of people, rather than true differences. Recognise that within-group differences are often more extensive than between-group differences.
- **Commit to learning more about the working knowledge and skills associated with diversity-sensitive helping.** Dealing with our personal assumptions about people who are different to us, is a lifelong mission. The ethical helper is obliged to continue to address their own assumptions, testing them for accuracy and either putting them aside, or turning them into *informed generalisations*. It is also important that you subject the assumptions, models and techniques of diversity-sensitive helping to the same scrutiny as other helping approaches.
- **Contribute to developing a tolerant environment in your workplace.** The environment in which you work can have as much influence on *making or breaking* client trust, as your individual helping approach. A client is likely to assume the compatibility of your attitudes and values with those of your agency, until they get to know you, individually, better. If your workplace environment is intolerant, they may never dare to approach you for help at all!

... **A Partnership.** (Seeing yourself as working *alongside* a client, rather than being *above* them.)

- **Accept helping as a natural, two-way influence process.** Most people seek help many times a day ... even if they are not conscious of it. This includes you! Treating a request for help as an ordinary, natural thing to do, can assist a client to

talk more freely and comfortably with you. When clients seem awkward about talking with you, it can be useful to talk openly about the many times you've found it helpful to talk with other people, or even to ask for some brief help from them in an area they seem to know about. (The important thing is that you are doing this as a strategy to help them feel safe ... not an opportunity to meet your own needs.)

- **Become a consultant to clients.** We tend to think of a *counsellor* as someone who tells people how they should deal with their problems, and a *consultant* as someone who is a resource (a source of stimulus and ideas). Whilst these are not always accurate assumptions, the principle is what is important here. Your job is to *value add* to a client's life ... not to try to live it for them.
- **Do not over-emphasise the helping role.** Whilst you have particular ethical responsibilities that should underpin everything you do with clients, this is unrelated to the style of your interaction. Professionalism has nothing to do with formality. Very often, a highly productive helping interaction looks no different from a friendly conversation. If you treat the person you are talking with as a genuine equal, you will not appear phony, and the client is much more likely to talk openly with you.
- **Avoid defensiveness.** If you really believe that the client is your equal, then they should be free to challenge you, and the way you interact with them, just as you might challenge them. If you always explain or justify your behaviour when clients give you feedback, they are less likely to trust you. If you come to the interaction with an attitude of genuine curiosity and enthusiasm for new learning, they are likely to do likewise. You are *modelling* the kind of behaviour that might help them to tackle problems at other times in their daily life.
- **Share the helping process with clients.** Constructive helping is a collaborative activity ... it only works if you do it together. If you are using a particular model, or skill, or approach, it can be really useful to explain it to your client. This helps overcome the idea that you can *fix them*, or are superior to them. It also gives the client a tool that they can use themselves for dealing with future problems.

... **Authentic.** (Being a *real person* who is honest about what they can and can't offer.)

- **Be friendly.** *Friendliness* isn't the same as *friendship*. It's important to distinguish between presenting as a *real person* who genuinely cares about their clients and forming personal, social relationships with clients. Keeping all your helping interactions with clients within the workplace, can be a useful way of maintaining this distinction.
- **Be flexible.** Part of recognising human diversity, is being able to adjust to build the kind of relationship that suits each client. For example, some might prefer to plan a set time to talk with you, and go to quiet private place to do this; others might prefer an apparently casual conversation in a room full of people.
- **Work within your agency's parameters.** Different types of helping interactions are possible in different workplaces and worker roles. For example, if your job is to run classes, then there is clearly not enough time for you to talk with individual clients. In this case, you might talk with them briefly to ascertain what the problem is, take responsibility for finding someone that this client can talk with about their problems in more detail, and refer them.

- **Work within your own limitations.** Many community services workers are not trained to undertake in-depth therapeutic counselling. It is important to know what skills you do and don't have, so you do not *get out of your depth* and risk doing harm to a client. It is your responsibility to know your own strengths and limitations, and have conscious strategies for communicating these to clients who seek your help.

... **Trustworthy.** (Being a person who does what they say they will do, and can keep secrets.)

- **Be consistent.** Don't promise to do anything, unless you are sure that it is possible within the limits of your job and abilities. If you promise to do something, do it. If you say you can talk with someone for 15 minutes, then stick to 15 minutes, and make another time to talk with them if necessary and appropriate.
- **Respect the privacy of your client.** Don't gossip with anyone, about your clients. Be clear about your own, and your agency's approach to confidentiality. (Is everything a client says, confidential? Or, are you obliged to report talk of any illegal activities to your boss? Or the police? Can you talk with others in your own agency or other agencies on a *need to know* basis, about what your client tells you?) Clients are entitled to know exactly how private their conversations with you are, before they start telling you personal things about their lives.

... **Productive.** (Treating the helping interaction as an opportunity to enable someone to achieve, rather than just a social interaction.)

- **See helping interactions as conscious work.** Often helping occurs in the midst of ordinary interactions with clients. It is evident that you have moved beyond ordinary social support, into a discussion that focuses on a particular concern of a client. Once you realise this, the way you interact with the client may not change in any way that is obvious to them, but you are responsible for being very conscious of your interactions and their possible effect on the client. You are being paid to do this work, and are therefore responsible for ensuring that your time is spent in conscious service provision, rather than social *chit chat*. (Of course, social interaction is often an important aspect of your conscious service provision, and an important tool in building the levels of trust and comfort clients might need to feel able to talk with you about issues affecting their lives. It becomes illegitimate when it is the only thing you do, and you are unwilling to undertake more difficult helping interactions.)
- **Help the client to become a better problem solver in their daily life.** Really efficient helping gives clients some tools for dealing with problems in the future. This reduces the likelihood that they will need to talk with a professional helper (or counsellor or therapist) every time they face a new life issue. A focus on *enabling mutual learning*, rather than *helping*, can help in achieving this. It encourages a perception of problems as normal things that everyone experiences. By presenting as an equal, you demystify the process of dealing with these normal things. The helping relationship can provide a useful focus for learning about new ways to tackle problems, thus encouraging clients to try processing issues differently next time.