The use of counselling skills
IN THE EMERGENCY SERVICES

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This book seeks to apply the theoretical rationale for counselling skills to the practical nature of emergency service work. With this intention, much of the discussion on the practical use of counselling skills by emergency service professionals is based on research into the stress and trauma of emergency service work (Hetherington 1993; Hetherington and Munro 1996). The responses of a broad sample of emergency service professionals involved in that research are referred to throughout the book, either in the form of narrative cases or as direct quotes. Specific details have been changed to protect anonymity. The views expressed by emergency personnel, like the associated research, may change in relation to new developments, and as such may create as much argument as they may do agreement. The combination of continued debate and informed practice form the medium for continued learning about the appropriate use of counselling skills.

The book is intended primarily to promote discussion on the effective use of counselling skills both when dealing with the public and in the workplace with fellow colleagues. The book addresses issues experienced by the fire service, police service, accident and emergency and ambulance personnel in their daily work. The material is also of relevance to disaster workers and to the voluntary emergency services such as the British Red Cross. Although caution should be used in applying the experiences of
any one professional group to those of another, the commonality
of certain aspects of the job such as working with traumatic
incidents and their aftermath allows some generalization.

The nature of emergency service work can involve regular
exposure of personnel to traumatic incidents. This requires emer-
gency service professionals to understand and to manage the
post traumatic reactions of individuals with whom they are deal-
ing. Equally their frequent exposure to traumatic incidents can
render professionals themselves vulnerable to post traumatic stress
reactions. For this reason, the specific emotional and psycholo-
gical sequelae of traumatic experiences together with appropriate
individual and organizational interventions are considered in
more depth.

It is important that counselling skills are practised in full
knowledge of the individual and organizational responsibilities
for their use. Thus the trained use of counselling skills by per-
sonnel in their various roles as professionals, peers and managers
is discussed within a legal and professional perspective. The more
detailed information on the ethical and legal implications in the
use of counselling skills is by its nature bound by theory and can
be used for reference when required.

The book is written from a female perspective, which will
have influenced the views expressed; equally it will have been
influenced by being written from a psychologist's viewpoint and
not from an emergency service employee's perspective. This may
lead to debate in itself about some of the issues raised; however,
the text is not intended to be prescriptive but to raise issues for
further discussion.
Chapter 1

Counselling skills in the context of the emergency services

The attraction to the job

Adrenalin’s flowing, tension’s high, everyone’s geared up ready to fly into action to manage the emergency situation. It’s everything we’ve been trained for, the whole team. At times like this no one remembers the failed rescues, no one thinks of the aftermath, the personal price, only the chance of doing it well.

Working for the emergency services is a challenging and potentially highly rewarding vocation. Yet by the nature of the job it is one of the most stressful occupations. Police officers, firefighters, disaster workers, medical, ambulance and voluntary emergency personnel all contend with considerable stress as a result of their responsibility for the life and safety of others. The cumulative stress and the trauma of the job can have damaging effects on their personal and professional lives. Yet the unpredictability of the amount and type of work in the emergency services, even if sources of stress, are also found to be attractive features of the job to certain personality dispositions.

Research has shown that the people who are attracted to a career with inherent powerful stressors have very different personalities from the average person who holds a far less risky or demanding job (Mitchell and Bray 1990). Emergency professionals tend to have high levels of commitment, challenge and control and are more resilient to stress (Hetherington 1993). They find
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the job rewarding and set high personal standards, but experience considerable anguish in the event of failure. Emergency personnel are more likely to be outgoing and are motivated by internal factors such as the satisfaction of the job and a personal sense of competence. They do not like deferred gratification and are more easily bored. They are frequently action oriented, task oriented and quicker to make decisions and to take risks. Emergency personnel lay themselves open to dangers associated with exposure to disease, violence, mutilation and death. They are motivated to assist and to rescue others and to intervene actively in disputes, conflicts, disasters and potentially dangerous situations.

The nature of the job

I recall nearly all of the accidents I’ve attended vividly. Some have upset me deeply at the time but it’s important to shut off so you can help the people involved. I try to avoid looking back at an accident because if I think about it too long I remember the family the victim may have left and the grief they must feel. I have been adversely affected by these accidents but the change in me has been gradual therefore it’s difficult to describe exactly how I’ve changed. I have grown accustomed to death and to fear.

This quote by a senior ranking emergency service employee highlights the indelible impact that emergencies have on those who respond to them and raises the question of why and how they manage such events.

Human problems are universal, as is an inclination to help others experiencing difficulties. For those involved in traumatic incidents, their reactions to the event are disturbing in themselves. To manage traumatized individuals requires fundamental skills to diffuse the emotions of those involved sufficiently to allow them to cope more readily with their immediate situation.

The skills involved in these situations are remarkably similar. They are core human skills which can be applied to most situations. When used effectively they are at times barely discernible and enable the professionals to fulfil their primary role.
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Yet when used badly, they can compound the problem for both the individuals concerned and for the professionals in the execution of their duties.

Counselling skills may be actively employed within the emergency profession in a variety of forms. These include the use of skills in the interface with the public, with peers at work, and in a supervisory or management capacity. Each of these applications ultimately influences the internal organizational culture and its external public image.

The use of counselling skills in the job

Never having come across A and E [accident and emergency] work, where the psychological abuse of staff is commonplace, it was a shock knowing how to deal with it. Experience and a counselling course has given me a lot of help and guidance in dealing with these things, and with my own stress.

Attitudes towards authority have changed considerably over the years. No longer can an emergency service worker rely on their role or their status as a professional to command respect. For the police, achieving public compliance with the law is increasingly dependent on allaying conflict and negotiating acceptable behaviour. Forging a relationship with an individual, through sensitivity and the appropriate use of social skills, can be an effective way of influencing their behaviour and resolving disputes. Equally, when members of the public are emotionally overwhelmed by a traumatic event, effective interpersonal interaction by an emergency service worker can help to restore a sense of control to the situation, and manage some of the associated mental anguish for those involved. Creating an immediate rapport with an individual in a state of high emotion, containing their feelings and striving to achieve a useful outcome, entails a considerable amount of interpersonal skill and experience. These abilities can be considered to be core counselling skills.

Training in counselling skills provides the emergency services with a powerful tool in the dynamics of their interaction with the public. The use of such skills in the job can be mutually
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rewarding, providing the emergency service professional with a sense of fulfilment and engendering in the public an appreciation for the support proffered. Frequently, the competent use of trained skills may at times be the only reward available for the emergency service in the face of public abuse, disaster or devastation. The sometimes ungratifying nature of police work is reflected in the following road traffic patrol officer’s expressions of frustrations with the job:

The root cause of fatal accidents is often selfishness and disregard for the lives and welfare of others. These people vent their frustration and rage on innocent victims. They are the ones who usually survive, leaving the victim’s family with the pain for their loss, and their anger at us for not bringing the guilty party to justice. Even if they are brought to book, the odds seem stacked in their favour and a pitifully inadequate sentence is passed on them.

The following situation was reported by a student in training who felt at the time unable to cope with the situation. Such situations inevitably require experience to allow the professional to become resilient to the more distressing elements of the event. The trained use of counselling skills can not only help those immediately involved in the situation to come to terms with the disturbing event but equally enable the professional to feel that their support has been worthwhile.

An old man was brought into A and E, saying that he was dying. He was referred on to the surgical on-call team who decided, considering his age and quality of life, that no surgical intervention should be taken. His wife was brought in. As he said Goodbye and thanked her for everything, he suddenly deteriorated. I felt overwhelmed and had to leave. A senior nurse stayed with him and his wife until he died.

This illustration also highlights the strengths and limitations of counselling skills. The man’s death was inevitable. Yet the ability of the nurse to remain with the couple and to use her presence
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Skillsfully would have provided support to both the man and his wife. Many devastating life situations of this kind can be managed more effectively through the use of counselling skills. Events which the emergency services respond to are primarily crises in the lives of those concerned. They also involve life events which require problem solving or interpersonal skills of the individuals involved. These situations require counselling skills of the professional if the situation is to achieve a more positive outcome. The outcome may be immediately evident. More likely, it will be longer term. People learn from modelled behaviour and from the cumulative effects of their experience. The supportive intervention from a figure of authority may have considerable effects on an individual whose experience of respect from others has been limited.

Egan (1986) makes the point that in the majority of cases, helping skills, including counselling skills, are provided by people who are not counsellors. Yet in the case of the emergency services, the dual roles can incur immediate conflict. For example, police officers who are effectively using counselling skills primarily have responsibility for upholding the law. Counselling skills may in fact enable them to conduct their law enforcement duties more successfully; but if these fail, police officers must ultimately act to enforce the law. For this reason, confidentiality emerges as a pivotal issue in the practice of counselling skills in the emergency services. Where the use of counselling skills occurs within a network of conflicting accountabilities, it is important that the limits to confidentiality are clear to the professional and conveyed unambiguously to the individual being supported.

**Formal peer support in the workplace**

In addition to using counselling skills effectively as part of their jobs, individuals are increasingly required to employ them to the benefit of their colleagues in the form of peer support. The emergency service, being in part a helping profession, may be considered to have the necessary skills and expertise required for people to help each other. Such an assumption is contested by Feltham (1997), who argues that it could be automatically assumed that an occupation that is part of a ‘people profession’ necessarily
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means that it is equipped to provide counselling for its own staff. The emergency services, however, delineate between counselling for staff and peer support for staff. Employees requiring counselling are referred to trained counsellors, specialists who are either internal or external to the organization as required. Peers provide a more readily available and formal collegiate support system founded on the commonality of their experience within the profession, their motivation to help and their training in counselling skills. Their expertise lies in their knowing the limitations of their skills, the boundaries of their role, and enabling the employee to access professional help. Untrained, informal support by well-intentioned colleagues can unwittingly risk compounding an employee's difficulties. The appreciation of support from peers is reflected in a senior nurse's reaction to an 8-year-old girl's accidental death:

Three of the staff involved had daughters of the same age. After two weeks of mutual support, we were able to talk about it without feeling distraught. Support came from within the department. We all felt that counsellors couldn't possibly know or understand how we felt.

The use of counselling skills in management

The skills of counselling are not only central to effective interpersonal interaction but equally rudimentary to the dynamics of an organization. Listening, a core counselling skill, can be fundamental to an organization's competence and success, forming the basis for good human relations and, in particular, employee and customer relations. Failure to listen and to attend to others cultivates poor communication patterns and unaddressed workplace problems; it also results in employee and customer dissatisfaction. When employers listen to the difficulties experienced by employees, they are effectively relieving them of their preoccupations with their own problem and, at the same time, modelling sound listening skills for use with the public. The following opinion was expressed in frustration by an emergency service worker who was aware of the incongruence between the way in which management seemingly responded to his difficulty and the interface he sought to achieve with the public:
Counselling skills in the context of the emergency services

I remember a particular fatality of a baby which, as a new parent, upset me. The supervisor told me to ‘get on with it’ and not to get emotionally involved. How can we remain human and close to the community if we strive to behave in a way which portrays us not to have feelings in common with members of the public. What can be so wrong at such a time in showing emotion?

Good interpersonal interactions with the workforce enable supervisory staff to remain sensitive to issues such as the employee’s experience in the job and current life events, and responsive to the individual’s personal interpretation of the incident. What has become commonplace to a seasoned employee may be a shattering experience to another for a variety of unavoidable reasons. Yet in times of trauma when individuals may be more sensitive to negative evaluation, words of criticism can be taken to heart and remain with the individual through the years to come. Counselling training can raise awareness of such issues, promoting a greater understanding of the power of the word and its effect on an individual’s psychological well-being and workplace performance.

Organizational implications

There are further benefits to be gained from training in counselling skills. Jarvie and Matthews (1989) list personal development, good communication, high motivation, a high performance team, mutual responsibility and synergy as some of the useful outcomes of skills training. Such assets can benefit the working environment of the organization if given due regard by management and fostered within the structure of the organization (Martin 1997). For example, training in counselling skills within the organization enhances interpersonal skills, improving communication and interaction generally. Research further suggests that there is significant transferability of counselling skills to other specific areas of management, such as appraisal, interviewing and discipline. Given the diversity of applications of counselling skills in the organization, it becomes imperative that individuals trained to fulfil a peer support role are able to distinguish
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between related activities such as mentoring, advising and appraising (Pickard 1993).

When counselling skills are employed for use within the organization with fellow employees, this can transform its culture. Pearce (1989) notes that the use of counselling skills in the workplace can act as a powerful tool for organizational change and development. McDonald (1991) highlights the reciprocity inherent in the counselling process, reflecting a partnership relationship between client and provider which significantly impacts on the fabric of a successful organization. Partnership is negotiated through communication. Communication is effected through focused and sincere attention to the employee. As much of managerial time is engaged in oral communication, the importance of the quality cannot be underestimated (Hughes 1991).

A senior A and E nurse commented on her feelings of exclusion from internal communications within the organization, which is entwined, in her experience, with interpersonal conflicts:

Lots of our department’s stress is caused by personality clashes and lack of communication from higher management. Changes just happen. There is no discussion. You are just expected to get on with it.

This clearly undermines her sense of authority and feelings of value to the organization. The timely use of counselling skills by management to address the issues associated with change and to resolve interpersonal conflict can in the long term be cost effective. At the very least, counselling skills can be instrumental in diffusing the anger and distress generated by the shared working environment as opposed to fostering discontent towards the organization over the longer term. Appropriate interventions by senior management can effectively cascade through the organization, providing models of behaviour which are readily adopted. The absence of assistance for employees who require support as a result of their experiences on the job can be a missed opportunity for an organization to forge a reciprocal relationship with those who work for it. Whether a problem is work related or personal, if it has become disturbing to the employee it can impede their judgement, morale or performance, and ultimately impact on organizational effectiveness. Failing to support employees in the
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Execution of their jobs may incur feelings of resentment and anger towards the employer which can interfere with their commitment to the organization. For example, a police officer reported an incident early in his career:

A car carrying a family of four had collided head on with another vehicle. Passers-by had pulled the children to safety. The smouldering bodies of both parents, burned to death, were still in situ in the vehicle. There's little or no support in the job. The only thing that matters is that you turn up for work the next day.

Although there are indications that the incorporation of counselling skills training into an organization can positively change the organizational ethos, this is not necessarily the case. Argyris and Schon (1984) stress the difference between an organization's 'espoused theory' and its 'theory in use'. The expectation that counselling values may reach the core of an organization and transform its fundamental values may be some way yet from realization. In fact the formal inclusion of counselling support can legitimize stress as a natural and universal product of the job with which the employee must contend, raising the issue of organizational responsibility.

Organizational responsibility

While peer support programmes and professional counselling services for employees can be considered to be effective in moderating the deleterious effects of work-related stress, they can also serve to absolve the employer of responsibility for the source of work-related stress. Newton (1995) is particularly critical of stress management programmes and employee support programmes. He argues that employees' grievances and difficulties are construed as individual concerns as opposed to the collectively justifiable reaction to inadequate working conditions that they might well be. He suggests that staff are subtly manoeuvred into interpreting work-related problems as their own individual responsibility, not as collective concerns. This analysis suggests that the organization benefits from supportive interventions.
Counselling skills in the emergency services because they reinforce the notion that emotion and discontentment are inappropriate in the workplace.

Feltham (1997: 249) proposes that many organizations could be considered to ‘abuse their employees’ moral rights’ by purporting how they should dress, when they may take coffee, lunch and holiday breaks, and ultimately where they take their problems. Conversely, Plas and Hoover-Dempsey (1988) promote the view that emotions are a part of organizational life and as such should be accepted rather than counselled. This perspective may be adopted successfully by organizations which actively decide to change the work ethos so that feelings and thoughts emanating from work-related events can be openly expressed, rather than contained before being taken to a counsellor. This legitimization of occupational stress can perhaps be most effectively facilitated and catered for in the workplace in the form of systematic staff debriefings. However, fundamental to any workplace policy on stress management must be an organizational willingness to combat the sources of occupational stress which are the result of the organizational structure, practices and working culture.

Essentially, the trained use of counselling skills can serve to facilitate and enhance the routine work of the emergency services, both in the interface with the public and in the relationships among staff. At the same time, they can permeate the culture of the organization to promote interpersonal effectiveness and a healthier working environment. The core features involved in the effective practice of counselling skills in the workplace are considered in the next chapter.