

MA Year Two Counselling Skills

Continued Steps to Consider as a Student Therapist

1. **Develop a Regular Self-Check-In Routine:** Before your client arrives, begin every session by grounding yourself, as outlined above. Practise making this a habit both before and during sessions.
2. **Pack your Self Care Tool Kit:** Make sure you have everything you need with you to help you feel presence and grounded in the sessions. Take time to explore what this really means.
3. **Practice Active Listening:** Engage with clients' stories without rushing to offer solutions or interpretations. Focus on deepening your understanding of their lived experience.
4. **Be Patient with Your Learning:** Understand that mastery of both foundational and advanced skills takes time. Approach each session as an opportunity to refine your abilities.
5. **Embrace Personal Development:** Use personal development to reflect on areas where you feel unsure, stuck, or emotionally triggered, and be open to feedback to support your development.

Before Starting – Grounding and Presence

To work effectively as a humanistic therapist, it is essential to begin by centring yourself and finding an embodied starting point. Your presence and awareness in the session create a therapeutic environment and help establish a safe, trusting space for the client.

Therapist Grounding Practices:

1. **Self-Regulation:** Regularly check in with your physical and emotional state throughout the session.
2. **Embodied Awareness:** Notice how your body feels as you sit, including your posture, breathing, and any physical tension.
3. **Check Physical Support:**
 - Are you comfortable in your chair?
 - Is the distance between you and your client appropriate—neither too close nor too far? Explore this together, this may change over the session, as your relationship develops or for a particular experiment.
4. **Practical Session Setup:**
 - Can you clearly see a clock to keep track of time?

- Are tissues nearby for emotional release?
 - Do you have water available to stay hydrated and maintain regulation?
 - Is the lighting ok? You can dim the lights in the pods.
 - Anything else you need in your self-care tool kit?
5. **Client Grounding:** Slow down, allow time for your client to arrive and land in the space with you and the session. You may want to Invite the client to join you in a short breathing exercise to help you both arrive in the present moment and establish a calm space together. This is something we will go over in class.
 6. **Safe Place Exercise for Self and Clients**
 7. **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**
 8. **Other grounding and stabilisation exercises**
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Personal Development & Self-Reflection

Ongoing personal reflection is vital for the therapist's growth and effectiveness. Awareness of your internal responses helps you manage countertransference, regulate your emotions, and maintain focus on the client's experience.

- **Pre-Session Awareness:** Take a moment before each session to observe how you are feeling. This simple check-in increases your capacity to stay present for your client.
 - **Tracking Feelings During the Session:** Regularly monitor your emotional reactions as the session unfolds, particularly when you feel discomfort, the urge to rescue, or frustration.
 - **Environmental Attunement:** Are you attending to your own needs in the room—adjusting your seat, taking a drink of water, or taking a breath? Breaking contact when you need to?
 - **Noticing Resistance:** Recognise when you feel unsure, bored, or pulled away from the client's experience. These moments might indicate areas of deeper engagement or reflection needed.
 - **Handling Time Pressure:** Be aware of feelings of rushing or pressure, especially when working within short timeframes like 10-minute check-ins. Endings are as important as beginnings.
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Foundational Humanistic Counselling Skills

These foundational skills form the core of a humanistic, person-centred approach, emphasising empathy, genuine curiosity, and presence.

Active Curiosity

- Cultivate an attitude of genuine curiosity, actively listening and asking questions to understand the client's lived experience.

Attending

- **Full Presence:** Be fully present with your client, showing attentiveness through your body language, posture, eye contact, and overall demeanour. Attending involves both verbal and non-verbal cues that indicate you are deeply engaged with the client.

Active Listening

- **Engaged Listening:** Listen carefully and communicate understanding back to the client. Active listening requires focusing on both the client's verbal and non-verbal communication while refraining from interruptions.
- **Paraphrasing and Reflecting Content:** Rephrase or paraphrase what the client has shared to confirm your understanding of their experience. This helps clarify their message and shows that you are listening closely.
- **Reflecting Feelings:** Reflect the emotional content of what the client is saying, acknowledging both what is being said and how it is being felt. This supports the client in deepening their emotional awareness.

Communicating Appropriately and Clearly

- **Accessible Language:** Use language that the client can easily understand when explaining therapeutic processes or discussing session content. Avoid jargon or overly complex language to ensure clarity.

Sensitive and Accurate Communication

- **Sensitivity:** Be mindful of your tone, body language, and choice of words to communicate in a way that is sensitive to the client's emotional state.
- **Accuracy:** Ensure that your reflections and responses are accurate representations of what the client has communicated, without altering their meaning or imposing your own assumptions.

Counselling Contract and Confidentiality

- **Establishing a Contract:** Discuss and agree on a counselling contract with the client in a clear, accessible manner. Make sure the client understands the structure, expectations, and boundaries of the therapeutic relationship.
- **Explaining Confidentiality:** Clearly explain confidentiality, including its boundaries and any situations where you may need to break confidentiality (e.g., risk of harm). Ensure the client understands when and why you may need to seek their consent.

Present-Moment Awareness

Invite the client to “arrive” at the beginning of the session, taking a moment to pause and notice their body or emotions.

- **Nurturing Mindfulness:** Help both yourself and your client stay grounded in the present moment. This involves focusing on immediate experiences, emotions, and bodily sensations to enhance self-awareness.
- **Some examples...**
 - "I wonder what are you aware of right now?"
 - "I wonder where do you feel this in your body?"
 - "I wonder what is it like to sit with that feeling or sensation?"
 - "I wonder what comes up for you as you say that?"
 - "I wonder what is it like to share that with me?"

Concreteness

- **Encouraging Specificity:** Help clients move from vague or abstract language to more concrete descriptions of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This can deepen understanding and insight.
- **Example:** “When you say you feel anxious, can you describe how that anxiety shows up physically or emotionally for you?”

Open Questions

- **Encouraging Exploration:** Use open-ended questions to invite the client to explore their experience more deeply. These questions encourage the client to reflect and share more than simple yes or no answers.
- **Example:** “Can you tell me more about what that experience was like for you?” or “What feelings come up for you when you think about that?”

Congruence (Genuineness and Warmth)

- **Being Genuine:** Show authenticity and openness in your interactions with the client. Congruence means being real and transparent, aligning your internal feelings with your external responses.
- **Warmth:** Demonstrate genuine care and warmth, creating a safe and supportive environment where the client feels accepted.

Empathy and Unconditional Positive Regard

- **Empathy:** Understand and reflect the client's emotional experience as if it were your own, but without losing your own sense of self. Empathy allows the client to feel heard and understood at a deep level.
- **Unconditional Positive Regard:** Show complete acceptance of the client, no matter what they bring into the session. This fosters a sense of safety and encourages openness.

Non-Verbal Communication and Silence

- **Reading Non-Verbal Cues:** Be aware of your client's non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, and tone of voice. Non-verbal signals often reveal more than words alone.
- **Using Silence Effectively:** Recognise when to use silence as a therapeutic tool. Silence can provide space for the client to reflect, process emotions, or deepen their thoughts without interruption.

Listening Skills and Techniques

- **Effective Use of Voice** Modulate your voice to create a calm, inviting atmosphere that encourages openness. Your tone can help soothe or ground the client during emotional moments.
- **Focusing:** Help the client focus on a particular thought, emotion, or experience that seems important but might be overlooked. This can lead to greater insight and understanding.
- **Immediacy:** Address what is happening in the therapeutic relationship in the moment, bringing awareness to what is being felt or observed between you and the client right now. This skill will develop over time with more confidence and experience.
- **Mirroring:** Reflect the client's non-verbal behaviours, such as posture or gestures, to build rapport and show empathy.
- **Managing Silence:** Use silence intentionally to allow the client space to reflect or process their thoughts and emotions. Being comfortable with silence can help the client explore deeper feelings.
- **Pacing:** Adjust the pace of the session according to the client's needs, allowing time for reflection, processing, and exploration without rushing or forcing a direction.
- **Summarising:** Periodically summarise what the client has shared to clarify meaning and validate their experience. This helps consolidate key themes and encourages further exploration.

Advanced Humanistic Counselling Skills

Once you feel comfortable with foundational skills, therapists can develop more advanced, nuanced ways of working, especially drawing on Gestalt and Existential approaches.

Gestalt Therapy Skills

- **Bracketing:** Temporarily set aside personal biases or assumptions, fully attending to the client's experience without interpretation.

- **Description:** This involves staying with the awareness of what is immediately obvious and describing what you see. For example, I am noticing that.. You seem to be saying...You look.. I am aware that..
- **Horizontalism:** Everything is as important as everything else. The counsellor does not assume any hierarchy of importance in what they see or respond to. A movement in a client's body may be as meaningful as they are talking about.
- **Dialogical Relating:** Engage in authentic, present-moment dialogue where both therapist and client are equal participants in the therapeutic relationship.
- **Creative Indifference:** The most useful attitude the counsellor can adopt to facilitate this process is one of creative indifference. It is based on the idea that the counsellor does not have a vested interest in a particular outcome. It is another way of facing the existential uncertainty of the unknown.
- **Explore the Clients Contact Functions**
- **Zones of Awareness:** Encourage clients to broaden their awareness across different areas, such as thoughts, bodily sensations, feelings, or external environment, to gain a fuller understanding of their experience. Working with the clients inner zone, outer zone and middle zones.
- **Explore the Cycle of Awareness and the Blocks to Contact –** we will explore this in class

Embodied Process & The Here-and-Now

- Ground the client in the present moment and bodily sensations, sharpening awareness of the "here and now". Encourage focus on immediate experience without leaping ahead to solutions.
- **Awareness Techniques:**
 - Sharpen and expand the client's awareness of ongoing experiences, especially those they tend to minimise or avoid.
 - Direct the client's attention to unexamined or suppressed aspects of their experience.

Support and Internal Resources

- Regularly check on the client's sense of internal and external support. Who or what supports them emotionally? What safe bases do they have in their life?

Gestalt Experiments to Expand Awareness

- **Working with Discomfort:** Gently support/encourage/invite clients to stay with uncomfortable feelings instead of avoiding them. This increases their capacity for emotional regulation and self-awareness.

- **Exploring Small Movements or Postures:** Bring awareness to minor body movements and postural shifts, deepening clients' understanding of their embodied responses.
 - **Using “I” Statements:** Encourage clients to take ownership of their experiences by using "I" statements, nurturing empowerment and personal responsibility.
 - **Support Clients to Find their “Yes”, “No” and “Maybe” in their Bodies –** we will explore finding yours in class first.
 - **The Empty Chair**
 - **Two Chair Work**
 - **Focusing**
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Existential Skills

Existential therapy often involves exploring the client's deeper questions about existence, meaning, and personal responsibility. Integrating these skills deepens the humanistic approach.

- **Exploring Meaning and Values:** Support clients in examining the meaning they ascribe to their life experiences and exploring values that shape their decisions.
 - **Confronting Existential Givens:** Help clients face the inevitabilities of life, such as death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness, while exploring how these realities affect their day-to-day lives.
 - **Authenticity:** Encourage clients to live in a way that feels authentic to their true self, not just conforming to external expectations or societal pressures.
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