

# Librarians and the Art of Helping

Sara Fine

**SUMMARY.** This article explores the relationship between counseling theory and practice and the helping role of librarianship. The thesis is that in this information intensive environment, the art of helping a patron define and clarify the right problem is more crucial than ever before. Emphasis is on the beliefs that underlie the counseling role and the behaviors that allow the patron to move from the reference question to the real problem. Examples of non-helpful and helpful responses are presented and analyzed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworth.com](mailto:getinfo@haworth.com)]

## THE PROBLEM

The girl is very thin and very young, maybe twelve or thirteen. Her eyes are hollow. Her nails are bitten to the quick. "Would you have any books on nerves?" she asks. "I mean, how can you tell if someone is having a nervous breakdown?" Does this scene take place in a school counselor's office or at the reference desk of a busy public library? To the counselor, a client's problem has been introduced, along with its pain and complexity, and the therapeutic process has begun; for the librarian, a complicated professional dilemma has been opened up. The librarian must quickly decide how much personal information the patron may be willing to reveal

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and how much to allow, a decision that will be based in large measure on the level of emotion the librarian can comfortably endure. The librarian, then, sets the interpersonal level on which the transaction will take place. In the instant of reply, that decision will be clearly communicated to the patron and the scope of professional service will be defined. The librarian will have decided whether to answer the question or to respond to the problem. The librarian will have taken a position on whether or not there is a counseling function inherent in the delivery of library service.

To the patron the difference is crucial. At the point of the reference question, there is no way for the librarian to know what the problem is. In fact, sometimes the patron has not yet defined the real problem for herself. It would be so easy to assume that the patron needs the information for some intellectual reason, and whether the assumption is true or not, we are tempted to answer as though it is: "Our books on mental disorders are located upstairs." But what if the reference question is a code for another kind of problem? Does the patron feel as though she's falling apart? Is she frightened because someone close to her behaving strangely? Does this young person know the difference between healthy and unhealthy behavior? Does she need to know where to turn for help? Will the librarian give very good information—but to the wrong problem?

The issue of the librarian-as-counselor comes into sharp focus with the response to the cry of pain behind the patron's words. The librarian turns to the computer and types in a few words. With real compassion in his eyes, he says, "Here are several books on nervous disorders. Perhaps you can find the information you need. If not, let me know and I'll help you find some others." The librarian-as-counselor replies: "Sounds like something we should talk about."

### ***LIBRARIANSHIP AND COUNSELING: THE RELATIONSHIP***

If these scripts were played out further, different kinds of interactions would come into play and different outcomes would be likely to occur. In the first instance, the librarian and the patron stumble around in reserved, stylistic verbal games, each trying to read the meaning in the other's words. The young patron probably leaves the library with several books that contain answers to her stated request.

In the second instance, the patron has been given permission to go to another level, to the true nature of her anguish: her mother is behaving strangely and she is very frightened. She leaves the library with no books but (1) a sense of relief that her problem has at last found words and that someone has heard and understood, (2) a sense that she is a valuable

person worthy of attentive listening, and (3) the name and address of the local mental health agency. The librarian has not “performed” any therapy but yet has effectively assumed a counseling function. The difference between counseling-as-therapy and counseling as an interpersonal professional function is significant to the issue.

Therapeutic counseling is a highly complex enterprise in which professional practice requires extensive training and supervised experience. The counseling process has form and structure, theory and research behind it. In most states the practice of counseling requires licensing by credential, experience and examination. The concept of the librarian-as-counselor seems to bear little relationship to the professional practice of counseling-as-therapy.

But it does bear an important relationship. Out of the practice and theory of counseling has come an understanding of how human beings communicate and interact that is relevant to all of us, all of the time, whenever we engage in any relationship—whether personal or professional, with one significant other or in our organizational life. From the intensity and rigor of the therapy session have come understandings for promoting effective professional/client communications and relations, whatever the profession. It is an understanding that makes for collaborative relationships between doctor and patient, lawyer and client, librarian and patron. They aren’t complex or difficult skills. Paraprofessionals have been taught counseling skills, college students to offer peer counseling, and even fifth graders have been taught these skills as relationship-enhancing experiences. The function of “counseling,” that is, helping another to identify the nature and scope of a problem, then to explore and resolve it, is not the sole prerogative of the professional counselor.

There are times when each of us is counselor to someone else; there are times when each of us turns to another person when we are in distress. The function of counseling is an element in all relationships, whether it is done well or poorly, even if the function is unwillingly or unwittingly assumed. If the counseling function is refused or misused or abused, its absence is a destructive dynamic in a relationship. The concept of the librarian-as-counselor refers to this interpersonal function, not to the undertaking of a role as therapist.

There is a mystique about the counseling process that seems to arouse both anxiety and attraction. It is not the purpose of this article to argue and remonstrate that the librarian should assume a counseling function, although the bias of the writer is strongly evident throughout. The purpose is rather to dispel some of the cloudiness, to describe what counseling is and

what it isn't, how it operates, what it looks like, what it believes and how it can interrelate with professional library service.

### ***COUNSELING THEORY AND THE ART OF HELPING***

Counseling is above all else a philosophic stance. In the context of this article it derives its posture from a humanistic belief that in each human being there lives the potential for self-determination and self-fulfillment. Counseling, then, is based on a general belief about human nature. It proposes that the first, basic and irrefutable principle upon which mutual and mature relationships are based—whether personal or professional, intimate or casual—is a belief in the uniqueness, complexity, psychological intelligence and capacity for growth that resides in ourselves and in others. The theory proposes that while self-defeating emotions and anti-social behaviors exist, they are not inherent in our nature. Rather they are reactions to the frustration of our natural striving for love, belonging and security.

Further, counseling theory assumes that except for those who are mentally ill or sociopathic, positive capabilities exist within each person—for example, to reverse a cycle of failures, to reassess a self-destructive belief, or to break out of an emotional paralysis—and that those capabilities can be released within a relationship that is open, accepting and non-judgmental, that is, the conditions of counseling. A person provided with these conditions for growth will develop constructively, as a seed grows and becomes its potential.

In a larger social or organizational sense, the counseling role is to encourage a climate for growth wherever people live and work. If we see “counseling” as a condition of the psychological environment, then the moment of counseling can take place anywhere, under any circumstances. It is not confined to a special room at an appointed hour. The “placeness” of counseling is independent of place, for the climate, this condition of being free to pound one's chest with pride or beat it in despair, goes beyond time and place and professional role. It can happen even when there are other people in the room and other business waiting to be transacted.

### ***HOW COUNSELING BEHAVES***

Counseling is a set of behaviors that are intentioned toward closeness rather than distance, self-revelation rather than withholding, harmony with

another in space and time rather than disjointedness. The counselor's responses are authentic, reflecting an internal condition of receptivity within the counselor. The humanness of the other person is confirmed by the acceptance of all feelings, even rage and outrage. Counseling supports self-awareness, it speaks truth, it waits patiently, it follows rather than leads. It sometimes confronts, cajoles, urges, and interprets, but it never advises, pries, denies or degrades. It presumes both innocence and wisdom, ambiguity and ambivalence, self-control and self-direction. It says, "I respect your humanness even when you feel weak, and I esteem your capability to find your own strength. Now we begin from there."

Counseling listens and tries to see the world through the client's vision and perceptions, through a veil of the client's history, culture, experience and personality. It does not impose values or moralism or platitudes. It does not reprimand or demand. It is not distracted by one's own internal noises and voices that whisper about work to be done or other people to be seen. It attends intently and patiently to both the crucial and the trivial, knowing that my own trivia may be another person's sorry.

Counseling is a relationship with many sizes and shapes—long-term and ongoing or a single moment of encounter; most often it is a brief moment within the flow of a relationship. But there are two elements within that moment that make it distinctive; first, that the one who is in the counseling role is trying to move into the life focus of the other; and second, that the counselor is not acting out his or personal agenda, problems, goals or values at the expense of the other. What make the counseling moment a unique interpersonal experience is that the growth of one becomes the mutual concern of both.

### ***BELIEVING AND BEHAVING***

Belief determines behavior, just as behavior determines belief. Most of the time we are aware about our beliefs and feel compatible with our behavior and that makes us comfortable. But at other times our behavior seems to belie our beliefs and our beliefs stand in contradiction to our actions. A basic premise in counseling theory is that the way we behave is a manifestation of the things we consciously or unconsciously believe. Our behavior may be disguised but it does not lie. It is consistent even in its apparent inconsistency. We bluster and bombast when we are insecure but our behavior is often transparent. We feign liking, acceptance or compliance but our facade is then our behavior, a coverup of our real beliefs. On the most profound level, we are what we believe.

It would seem, then, that if we are to look at the behavior we must first

look at beliefs. If those beliefs confirm the inherent value and potential in the other person, then whatever the role, profession, situation or relationship, we would be reflecting the philosophic stance of counseling. Intention is not the same as behavior. We may intend to nurture another's self-development with kindness and advice but behind our words are contradicting meta-messages. While warmth and attentiveness communicated nonverbally often have more meaning for the client than do verbal responses that are unhelpful, it is the congruity between intention and words and the consistency of beliefs with responses that define the posture of the counselor.

### ***RESPONSES AND IMPLICATIONS***

It is very difficult to describe an interpersonal process and to capture the nuances, subtleties, levels of meaning, present circumstances, external contingencies, internal bombardments that operate in even the most brief and simple interaction. But many times one's beliefs begins to lay themselves out little by little for others to see. A look at little slices of interaction, while they cannot tell us everything, can begin to indicate a whole pattern, just as looking at a specimen under a microscope can give some clues from a little scrap to a whole. The following are a few specimens for examination:

If we were asked to respond quickly and spontaneously to the following kinds of statements, made by a patron who is expressing great agitation or intense pain, our responses could probably be anticipated:

Client Statement: "I don't know where to begin."  
Response: "Begin at the beginning."

Client Statement: "Life doesn't seem worth living. Sometimes I'd like to end it all."  
Response: "That wouldn't solve anything."

Client Statement: "Do you have any books on death?"  
Response: "Yes, we have a collection of books on the subject."

Client Statement: "I think I'm pregnant."  
Response: "Have you seen a doctor?"

Client Statement: "I'm going to quit school. I'm not getting anything out of it."

Response: "If you don't finish school there are many opportunities that will be closed to you."

Client Statement: "Now that I'm crippled I'll never get married."

Response: "Many crippled people have lived rich and full lives. I'm sure you have a good chance of marrying. If you think positively you'll realize that you have much to offer."

Client Statement: "I hate my husband. I wish he were dead."

Response: "You don't really mean that. If he were dead you'd be really sorry for your wish."

Client Statement: "I wasn't asked to go to the party. I'm ashamed to face my friends."

Response: "Another chance will come along. Next time you'll probably be invited."

Client Statement "I'm just not attractive to men."

Response: "Physical beauty isn't everything. Develop some other aspects of your personality."

Client Statement: "I don't know what I want to do when I graduate."

Response: "Have you talked to your counselor?"

Client Statement: "Can I talk to you? I think I'm gay."

Response: "Sometimes young people think they are homosexual, but it's just a stage they're going through."

This exercise in responding has been used numerous times with professional librarians as well as with graduate library school students. The results are almost always the same. With few exceptions the responses are either identical with the one given or some variation with the same implications. Occasionally there is an intuitive response that accurately reflects the client's feelings—an implied invitation to explore and clarify the problem. But for the most part, these examples reflect the way people tend to react to emotion. While it is hard to fault these conventional responses, there are some issues at stake that need to be identified, clarified and evaluated.

First of all is the chilling fact that the responses are predictable, as though a person and a problem have no uniqueness and responses come in packages. To the receiver of the message a belief becomes evident—that he or she is a problem to be quickly solved, not a person to be encountered.

Many of the responses attempt to offer encouragement and the intent of the responder is to reassure. But the effect is often just the reverse. Does the person who has not been invited to the party really believe that she will be invited next time because someone says so? And if she does believe it, does that assure that it will happen? Is she not, in the last analysis, being patronized, dismissed? Does she not know that she is being patted on the shoulder than being helped to cope with something that really exists for her? The reassuring responses to the crippled person, the boy who is gay, the unattractive woman, do they not destroy trust because the "encouragement" they offer is false? Doesn't the person inwardly mutter, "You just don't understand," or "Just because all those great people made it doesn't mean that I will"? Most importantly, false encouragement discourages. It discourages the client from facing not only externally imposed realities, but the internal processes that have been mobilized to cope with those realities. It shuts off talk. It diminishes trust. It forces the client to repeat and repeat: "No, I'm sure I won't be invited," or "But I really do think I'm gay," or "But most cripples don't get married." Round it goes, until maybe the listener finally hears. Only then can it go forward toward some understanding and insight. More often the result is a discouraged patron and a frustrated librarian.

Notice that each response gives a little sermon, either directly or indirectly. The counselor as moralist judges the client as the misguided suppliant. The homily is based on the same theme—if you would only change your attitude, you wouldn't have a problem. Each response represents a belief in the most conventional, socially acceptable value system—that suicide is immoral, that parents should be loved, that unmarried pregnancy is a misfortune, that education leads to success, that homosexuality is a fate to be avoided, etc., etc. The belief of the responder, that "clean" living and "moral" thinking will set everything right, rings loudly and nobly to the misguided one.

In each example there is an undercurrent of intense emotion. Yet each response says clearly, "I don't recognize the feeling. I don't want to talk about feelings. I can't deal with strong emotions." The belief is again in evidence: people should not exhibit intensity in public, certainly not in a library; negative feelings are not acceptable; some things you tell me make me uncomfortable. Notice how consistently there is a hidden message that says, "You shouldn't feel that way." You shouldn't hate, feel rejected or experience futility.

### HOW COUNSELING WORKS

A platitude, a sermon, a question with a hidden meaning—do they really carry such strong implications? Perhaps if we follow the interaction to just the next step in the sequence the implications would become clearer.

Client Statement: "I hate my husband. I wish he were dead."

Conventional Response: "You don't really mean that."

Client Reaction: "Yes, I do. He's a drunk. He beats me when he's drunk and he won't let me out of the house when he's sober. We'd all be better off if he were dead."

Consider the course the interaction might take if the response were as follows:

Client Statement: "I hate my husband. I wish he were dead."

Counseling Response: "You sound very angry."

Client Reaction: "Yes, I'm angry. I don't know if I can stand it any more. I've thought of leaving him but I'm afraid of him. And anyhow, I wouldn't know where to go." (Notice that the *problem* has changed.)

Notice the difference. The first client reaction was defensive, trying to convince the other person of the intensity of the feeling and the justification for it. The feeling is still identified as "hate." The problem is identified as the husband's, not the client's—and therefore cannot be resolved by the client. The interaction is spiraling, not progressing.

In the second instance, the feeling has been accurately identified as anger, and further understood as fear. The counselor has communicated some beliefs: (1) your feelings are valuable even if they are negative; (2) I can handle your emotions even if they are intense; (3) I see you as rational even if I don't yet see your rationale; (4) I'm willing to listen without judging, denying or running away; (5) you can take the lead and I will follow you.

The client has been encouraged to talk about herself as "owning" the problem rather than to focus on a problem that belongs to someone else. A major leap has taken place in one interaction: from saying, "My problem is that my husband abuses me," the client has moved to saying, "My problem is my own anger and fear. How can I handle and direct them and take charge of my life?" In that one verbal act the client has gained some understanding that you and I cannot solve someone else's problem or manipulate someone else into changing. We can only together try to understand ourselves so that we can act on our own behalf.

Here is the relationship between counseling and librarianship: notice the difference in the information need.

### **COUNSELING BELIEFS: WHAT COUNSELING SOUNDS LIKE**

The most helpful beliefs and responses that have been identified by those who have studied and practiced in the helping professions involve the following elements:

1. Total attentiveness and involvement that is actively communicated through body posture, eyes, fingertips, shoulders, the whole body. The body does not lie; it will betray our resistances and our judgments and contradict our well-intentioned words.
2. The ability to quiet our own "internal noise," the voices that remind us of work to be done or "appropriate" responses to make, that nag about an appointment to keep or a pain in the left arm; the ability to shut out the worry: What shall I say next? How shall I solve this person's problem? What if he stops talking? If one is truly listening, the voices inside are quiet and the voice of the other person can get through.
3. The acceptance of the other person as a rational person whose feelings and behavior, as seen through his or her own perspective, are logical; the belief that the other person has the innate capacity for insight, self-understanding, self-direction and responsibility for his own destiny.
4. The belief that what is denied and avoided produces a negative, enervating force that paralyzes and renders us helpless, that feelings expressed and pain described provide a release of energy and potency to act in one's own behalf. Anger denied festers. When it is expressed, accepted and understood, it dissipates, leaving one's rational self free once more.
5. A belief in the power of the "talking cure," even though it involves a mystical element that cannot be explained. No advice has been given, no solutions offered, and often an unchangeable situation remains unchanged. Yet the client suddenly sighs or smiles and says, "I feel much better. Thanks for helping me." The client feels that some control, even if it's just a little, has been regained. It is magic moment that never fails to touch both people with a sense of closeness and progress.
6. An understanding of some of the universal themes in human existence, a recognition of the existential loneliness of the human condi-

tion and the need to find some meaning in life. Counseling responds not only to the intellectual and the emotional, but the spiritual existence of the client.

7. The ability to laugh at one's self and with another.

### **RESPONSES THAT REALLY HELP**

The most effective helping responses involve first, a minimal encouragement to the client to continue—assurance that the counselor is involved and attentive (i.e., “Please go on,” “Tell me more,” “I see,” “Can you tell me more about it?” “Can you describe it?”) The most important words a librarian can use in response to a reference question are “Tell me more.” Second is the accurate and courageous naming of the client's feeling. Naming a feeling or a problem does not bring that feeling or problem into existence; it *already* exists. Something named loses its threat while something unvoiced remains large and frightening. Naming the feeling diffuses intensity and provides relief. Only when the intensity has been relieved can the client begin to be rational and to problem-solve.

If the examples of “client statements” above were viewed from a counseling focus, a different kind of response would emerge. Following are the same client-statements with the simple, classical, “reflection-of-feeling” response, the basic element in the helping relationship:

Client Statement: “I don't know where to begin.”

Counseling Response: “There are lots of things going through your mind at once.”

Client Statement: “Life doesn't seem worth living. Sometimes I'd like to end it all.”

Response: “Nothing seems worthwhile right now.”

Client Statement: “Do you have any books on death?”

Response: “Death can be a frightening subject.”

Client Statement: “I think I'm pregnant.”

Response: “And you're very shaken up about it.”

Client Statement: “I'm going to quit school. I'm not getting anything out of it.”

Response: “Being in school isn't doing much for you.”

And so with all the client-statements, the counselor responds to that which is being expressed—the cripple’s sense of futility, the anger, humiliation, inadequacy, confusion, panic being expressed in the rest of the examples.

Notice that the client’s reaction to these responses. The third move in the interaction will tend to be a spoken “Yes” rather than the “Yes, but . . .” of the earlier responses: “You really get it” rather than an un verbalized “You just don’t seem to understand.” The next thing the client says will be likely to get closer to the real nature of the problem.

Sometimes lists of examples seem simplistic and unauthentic, even gimmicky. Of course we must respond in our own words and style and with our own intuition. These examples can only serve to make a point as explicitly as possible. Counseling is a unique enterprise for each of us and involves the unique exercising of our own personalities, values, beliefs and styles. It is not a technique or a tool but a way of being more authentic with ourselves and with others.

### ***REACTING TO SIGNALING BEHAVIOR***

There is another kind of client, one who does not directly confront a problem, but who acts it out through signalling behavior. Here the tendency of the responding person is to tighten and tense and to react not as a counselor, but as another client!

Signaling behavior comes out as anger, disruptiveness, righteous indignation, defensiveness, or prejudicial outbursts. Conventional responses are usually either counter-anger or submission, active counterattack or passive sabotage, counter defensiveness or intellectualization. We react aggressively or helplessly. Principles of counseling, whether one is dealing with a client whose pain or problem is acted out through tears or through tantrums, still speak of acceptance, non-judgement, active listening, reflective responding, and above all, the presumption that intense feeling can be diffused and handled constructively if heard and accepted. Hostile feelings represent a reality for the speaker. Sometimes they are directed against the listener, even when they originated outside of the relationship. Whether they are the result of the immediate situation or are feelings misdirected, they leave rationality immobilized until the intensity is diffused.

### ***MORE EXAMPLES***

Again here are some examples and their conventional responses:

Patron Statement: “I’ve been waiting for this book to come in for two weeks and now that I have it the pages that I need have been torn

out. That's what happens when blacks take over a place. They destroy everything in sight."

Librarian Response: "I'm sure we can find another book with the material you need."

Notice that the response is submissive and placating but not problem-solving. The librarian has probably resisted saying something like: "Surely you don't believe that," or "That's not true. Surely there are some blacks you know . . ." The librarian has learned not to make a scene, not to get involved in an encounter, not to confront, but rather to behave "professionally" and avoid emotional issues.

But the problem remains and the anger has not abated. The counseling response to the anger is to name it: "You are very angry." The next statement that the patron makes will probably narrow the issue and relate it to a personal experience. The process will likely be to move from a global statement to a personal one: "I have an article due at the publisher's this week. . . ." A leap has taken place, and a small step toward "owning" the problem by the patron. Even the patron must hear that the problem is on the inside.

Another example:

Patron Statement: "I'd like to speak to the director. My fifteen year-old brought this book home and I am appalled that the public library would allow such trash to fall into the hands of innocent children. Why, this book has descriptions of different kinds of birth control and how to use them. How dare you allow such things."

Librarian Response: "Would you like to fill out a complaint form?"

Is this appropriate professional behavior? Perhaps. Problem-solving? No. If the librarian's response were: "It really upset you when your daughter showed you this book," an underlying message of respect and active listening would have been communicated. Respect for another does not automatically imply agreement, but it is the necessary first step towards communication.

One more example:

Patron Statement: A young patron has been told that a book cannot be taken from the library. His response is an obscenity reinforced by an explicit gesture.

Librarian Response: "Don't you speak to me like that, young man. When you can learn to speak civilly you will be welcome in this library."

What are the librarian's goals in this interaction? To force or convince the patron to mend his ways? To open up a relationship between them so that he or she might have some impact on the young patron? In no way will this interaction accomplish either one. It will accomplish nothing more than leaving a self-righteous adult face-to-face with a self-righteous youngster, neither listening to, caring about or having any impact on the other.

Perhaps the most significant effect of the counseling posture does not lie in its impact on the other person but in its impact on the quality of the relationship. The ability to listen attentively and to respond with empathy enhances every relationship and the people who live in them.

### ***THE LIBRARIAN AND THE ART OF HELPING***

Clients who seek professional service, whether as library patrons or medical patients, can be either enhanced or diminished by the experience. Professional people are often unknowingly involved with people in crisis, sometimes a consuming, life-altering crisis, more often one of life's mild but recurring traumas. Crisis, regardless of its magnitude, makes an individual more vulnerable to rejection and more inclined to self-doubt. It can make us see rejection in someone's detached professional manner. We experience self-doubt when a professional is even discreetly inattentive to our feelings. We feel the added stress of justifying those feelings to ourselves and defending them to others. And when the client leaves us feeling worse than he did when he came to us for help, we need to look at what the art of being a helping professional is about.

The more we know about people's information needs, their information seeking behavior, and what they hope for when they come to the library, the more complex it becomes to understand the needs of a single individual standing before us at the service desk. No, we are not therapists; we are not social workers. We don't have to "cure" anyone or change her environment. What we do is give people the information they need, and with it the ability to gain more control and direction in their lives. The value of counseling theory and behavioral principles is to help us do what we do better.

***RELATIONSHIPS AND THE COUNSELING IMPERATIVE***

As long as we work or live with other people, we will sometimes find ourselves in a counselor role, like it or not. We become “counselors” neither from inclination nor training, but from the inescapable weight and intensity of our relationships. The only real question is often not whether the librarian should act as counselor, but whether the counseling is effective or not and whether it results in the right information for the right problem.

**AUTHOR NOTE**

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