Annexure 9: Building a Foundation

Source: Kustner, 2011

Initial Contact

A person comes for counselling in one of the two ways: another organisation or person usually refers them, or they make a decision to seek counselling on their own. It takes a lot of courage for clients to come for counselling, and some are more eager than others to start the process.

When a person phones or asks to see a counsellor, it is important that the counsellor or telephone receptionist maintains ethical behaviour, as well as an empathic attitude, to give the client the impression that it is an emotionally safe place. The person’s problem is not usually discussed when the person phones or asks for an appointment. If the person starts discussing their problem, it is useful to reflect the client’s feeling and reassure them that you will discuss it in your session e.g. ‘It sounds like you are keen to talk now. Could we talk more about this on Thursday?’

An appropriate time and location is agreed upon by both parties, as well as any fees and procedures for cancelling the session. This initial contact forms the first part of the counselling contract.
Getting Started

When the person arrives for counselling, greet them respectfully and introduce yourself. Remember that you are in the role of counsellor, and the person is likely to see you as an authority, or provider of help. It is important to let the person feel comfortable, without losing your role as counsellor. Being over-friendly or ‘prim and proper’ usually does not create a favourable beginning for counselling.

Once you are both seated, the counsellor usually begins by asking the person for a few personal details – name, age, address and contact number. Some counsellors prefer their clients to fill in a client detail form.

Initial Agreements

Before discussing the client’s reason for coming for counselling, it is helpful to reassure the client that confidentiality will be maintained. Briefly explain the limits of confidentiality as well. Some counsellors, have an informed consent form that explains the ethical duties of the counsellor and what the client can expect from counselling.

‘Before we start, I just want to reassure you that everything we discuss here today will be kept confidential. The only time I might have to tell someone about our sessions is if I feel you may do harm to yourself or others, but I will always let you know if I do.’

At this stage, it is also suitable to briefly discuss and negotiate the duration of counselling, frequency and length of sessions, as well as any fees or counselling administrative procedures. In this initial agreement, it also useful to explain the roles of the client and counsellor, and what the client expects from the counselling relationship. In India, where counselling is not well understood, it would also be helpful to discuss what the client understands counselling to be; whether they have been for counselling before, and what their experience of counselling was.

Note all aspects of this initial agreement or contract are not necessarily explored in full, in the first session – it is usually re-negotiated, clarified and refined throughout the counselling process. It should be flexible and realistic.

How to Begin

An open-ended question is usually helpful to get the counselling session started: ‘What brings you here today?’, or a non-verbal gesture, such a nod of the head.

Statements such as, ‘How can I help you?’ may set the context that you are going to be ‘the helper’ and that the client is not able to help himself. This is not necessarily wrong but be aware of the impact of your words. Give the client time to respond, and empathically reflect on any non-verbal behaviour you may observe e.g. ‘It seems like it’s difficult for you to talk about it’.