

# **Learning Counseling and Problem- Solving Skills**

Leslie E. Borck, PhD  
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For my mother and father, Jackie, Doug,  
Devananda, and dear friends, all of whom  
have graced my life with their love.

L.E.B.

For Cindy Jo, Katie, John, Tommy,  
my Dad, my brother, and all those  
whose eyes tell us that we have worth.

S.B.F.

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# Preface

Philosopher Mortimer Adler, editor of an acclaimed edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, likes to talk about giving away knowledge—putting it in a form that others can absorb. Our aim is similar: to capture some of the magic of the skilled helper and to communicate it so that others may share in the benefits of these skills. We have reviewed our own counseling and problem-solving experiences, sought the advice of others, and read much of what is written on the art of helping. The helping skills identified in this search were then elaborated in a series of lessons using experimentally tested teaching methods. These lessons were carefully evaluated, and the revised versions appear in this book. Thus, *Learning Counseling and Problem-Solving Skills* and the accompanying *Instructor's Manual* are the results of these efforts in developing a rapid and effective method of teaching the skills of helping.

Helping skills have general applicability to a variety of situations at work or with your family, friends, or neighbors. Drawing on an array of everyday counseling situations, this book is appropriate for students interested in such professions as counseling, psychology, social welfare, medicine, public administration, personnel management, and other areas of social service employment. In addition, the book's emphasis on problem solving makes it particularly well suited to the needs of volunteers and nonprofessionals in such settings as community service agencies, halfway houses; group homes, telephone hot lines, crisis information centers, self-help groups, and other United Way agencies.

This book weds the skills of counseling and problem solving as they might be used in everyday situations. Using a combination of reading assignments, exercises, and practice, the book includes the counseling skills necessary for developing a good client-helper relationship. Students will also read about and practice the problem-solving skills that help clients or neighbors clarify their problems, identify ways to improve the situations, and make decisions about what to do. As such, this text is appropriate for college and university courses, independent study, workshops, and inservice training.

Writing a book is a bit like baking bread. We have assembled the ingredients, kneaded the dough, and let it rise. But though the method is familiar, the ingredients for this recipe are unique:

ADD: one heaping dose of feedback on the completeness of the training method from experienced counselors. We are especially grateful to Jim Lichtenberg, Dick Rundquist, and Art Thomas in this regard.

ADD: experience from the grassroots community service workers on the kinds of problems from which people suffer, possible alternative solutions, and the likely consequences of such alternatives. We are particularly indebted to Ocoee Miller for her substantial contribution to the Problem-Solving Index.

MIX THOROUGHLY: and give the manuscript to a good teacher and interested students for field-testing. Special thanks to Paula Whang for the many improvements lent by her thoughtful teaching approach. Thanks also to Kay Fletcher, Mark Mathews, Holly Hale, and Mike Everhart for their many helpful suggestions.

ADD: inspiration for the project and a testing ground for its utility. We will always be grateful to the low-income families who make up the Penn House community service center in Lawrence, Kansas, and to Barbara Thompson and Bessie Nichols in particular, for encouraging us to develop this training program.

BAKE

AND LET COOL: and give the completed work to an excellent editor for her finecombing and improvements. Our most sincere thanks to Trudy Raschkind Steinfeld for her assistance.

This book would not have been possible without the hospitality of the Center for Public Affairs at the University of Kansas.

# **Learning Counseling and Problem-Solving Skills**

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# **PART I**

# **INTRODUCTION**

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# 1

## Toward the Skilled Helper

*Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day.  
Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.*

*—Chinese proverb*

To act for persons in distress is to provide temporary help; to help them help themselves is to provide true assistance. The skilled helper listens to problems and helps clarify potential solutions. He or she opens up options for the client, helping identify alternatives for solving problems. In skilled helping, the client coproduces alternatives and helps analyze the most appropriate option. Accordingly, the skilled helper does not solve problems *for* clients, but *leads* them in finding their own solutions.

Our assistance is needed by those around us, whether we are professional or non-professional helpers, whether our services are free or for a fee. The husband, wife, single parent, teenager, or retired person who asks for help with a problem does not demand to see our training credentials before describing his or her concerns. Each of us, regardless of schooling or experience, listens to the problems of others and helps as well as possible.

This book is predicated on two rather simple premises. First, there are many talented helpers out there who have much to offer those who seek their assistance. Each of us has something to bring to another person, whether we are mental health workers, counselors, social workers, psychologists, police, nonprofessional service workers, crisis center volunteers, or good neighbors. Each of us has unique helping strengths such as warmth, sensitivity, genuine caring, or common sense. Such personal strengths are foundations on which positive helping is based.

It is also assumed that our helping efforts might be more effective if based on carefully evaluated counseling and problem-solving methods. Some ways of interacting with clients and analyzing their problems appear to be more effective than others. For example, such skills as listening actively, asking questions, reflecting feelings, summarizing, and solving problems may improve relationships with clients and the chances of helping with their problems. Such fundamental counseling and problem-solving skills are the objectives of this skill training program.



# 2

## The Training Method and Its Evaluation

An array of training methods is available with the goal of teaching various helping skills. This book, like the others, is designed to teach relevant helping methods. However, our book differs from many related texts in several important ways.

First, this text brings together the basic skills of counseling *and* problem solving. The skills of a good helper—listening actively, reflecting feelings, asking questions, summarizing, and opening and closing helping sessions—are central to competent helping. However, insofar as helpers are asked to do more than just listen—and are asked actually to help clients solve real problems—other skills are also needed. Problem-solving skills include helping clients to clarify their problem situations, to identify alternatives available to change the situation, to consider the consequences of the alternatives, and to begin to make decisions about what to do. In combination, these counseling and problem-solving skills represent a strong basis for positive helping.

Second, experimentally tested methods of behavioral instruction are used to teach these counseling and problem-solving skills. Years of research and development have shown that examples, study guides, practice, and feedback are particularly effective in teaching new skills. These behavioral teaching methods have been combined in a series of training lessons for each of the major skills of counseling and problem solving.

Third, the training lessons used in this book were carefully evaluated in formal research studies. In one study, we evaluated the effectiveness of the training lessons in teaching counseling and problem-solving skills to university students (Borck, Fawcett, & Lichtenberg, 1979). We found that the counseling and problem-solving skills identified in this text rose to nearly perfect levels following the reading, practice, and feedback outlined in this book. In addition, expert ratings showed an increase in the quality of counseling performance and in students' confidence in their helping abilities. Students were highly satisfied with the training method and the new skills that they had learned (Borck, Fawcett, & Lichtenberg, in press). In a second study, we found similar effects with nonprofessional social service workers, who also mastered the skills, gained in self-confidence, and reported satisfaction with the text (Whang, Fletcher, & Fawcett, in press). Thus, effectiveness of this text has been documented in formal research studies.

These three factors—the learning of both counseling and problem-solving skills, the use of experimentally tested methods of instruction, and the careful evaluation of these training lessons—contribute to the uniqueness of this text.

## HOW WAS THE METHOD DEVELOPED?

The counseling and problem-solving skills that you will be learning were identified in a review of the literature, an examination of many related training programs, and conversations with professional counselors. In addition, we spent many hours studying good and bad examples of counseling and problem solving in hopes of identifying the most important helping skills. These skills were then broken down into their many parts so that they might be learned more easily. Finally, drawing from our own experience in helping people with problems and teaching these skills to others, we prepared, field tested, and revised each of the training lessons. The training lessons are the result of these research and development efforts.

## WHAT IS THE TRAINING METHOD?

The training lessons contain descriptions of the when, why, and how of each counseling and problem-solving skill. These detailed instructions are followed by study guide questions by which the student may test his or her knowledge of the information. The student is given a chance to practice the skills in role-playing situations; feedback is provided by the instructor or a student partner. Thus, the training method combines instructions, examples, rationales, study guides, practice, and feedback in a highly effective teaching format.

So, you may expect that your time with this book will be rewarded with new skills of helping and increased confidence in your abilities to counsel people with problems. The efficiency of this learning method makes it a practical approach to learning skills for helping others.

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