

Introduction to 'The Skilled Helper' A Systematic Approach to Helping

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Aims: to introduce learners to a model of guidance. The emphasis is very much on introduction. It would require a separate course to cover the helping model in detail. The material covered is only the very basic structure of Egan's helping model. You are strongly advised to read Egan for yourselves.

Egan explains that 'a helping model is like a map that helps you know what to do in your interactions with clients. At any given moment, it also helps you orient yourself, to understand 'where you are' with the client and what kind of intervention would be most useful'.

This is just one of many helping models and Egan makes it clear that the Skilled Helper 'is not and cannot be all that you've ever wanted to know about helping'. It is important to investigate other models, to keep an open mind about other approaches and ideas in the helping professions. With more experience many guidance workers tend to borrow approaches or ideas from other disciplines and integrate these into their own model.

Stage 1 - The present scenario

Help clients identify, explore, and clarify their problem situations and unused opportunities

Step 1A: The story

In order to help clients, they need to tell their story. What are the problems? Have they missed opportunities and what are they? Many times clients come to see guidance workers because they cannot get their heads round a particular problem, they are confused about particular issues, or they do not have all the pieces for the full picture. Guidance workers help clients to clarify the issues therefore enabling them to progress to the next stage of developing goals and strategies. As Egan puts it 'the outcome of this step, then, is a frank discussion of the 'facts of the case'. In some cases the story tumbles out all at once, in other cases, especially when clients are reluctant because they have been sent to see the guidance worker, the story is likely to emerge slowly, and even that depends entirely on the communication skills of the guidance worker. Those clients who are reluctant to talk may also harbour feelings such as guilt or shame e.g. that they are not able to read and write. Alternatively, they may simply be uncertain or even anxious about the guidance exchange and it is up to the guidance worker to ease this anxiety by establishing rapport, empathy and positive regard.

Step 2B: Identifying and clarifying blind spots

We all have our unique perspectives on life based on our personal experience and knowledge. These tend to shape our beliefs about ourselves, other people and society in general. In a negative way our perspectives can actually hinder a development process, e.g. the self-fulfilling prophecy such as 'I'm no good learner' has already been discussed. Our perspectives are often so ingrained that we no longer challenge them even though it would be of advantage to step outside and take a look at them from a distance in order to evaluate how valid they still are. Through the skill of challenging the guidance worker enables 'clients to become aware of and overcome their blind spots and develop new perspectives on themselves and their problem situations' (Egan)

Step 3C: The Search for Leverage

Clients usually seek guidance because they want to change something in their lives but they may not be sure what this change constitutes or even what issues to focus on. Guidance workers help them 'identify and work on problems, issues, concerns, or opportunities that will make a difference' (Egan). Guidance workers help clients focus on important issues and to prioritise the order in which they are to be dealt with. In situations where clients are grappling with many issues at once, the guidance worker helps clients search for some leverage; by tackling one particular problem which will also contribute to resolving some of the other problems faced by the client, e.g. taking a up a course will have a knock-on effect on other issues e.g. higher qualification, better job prospects, higher pay etc.

Stage 2 - The Preferred Scenario

Help clients develop goals, objectives or agendas based on an action oriented understanding of the problem situation

Step 2A: Preferred Scenario possibilities

Having established what the problem is the client explores new avenues of what is possible instead. It helps client develop answers to the question 'What would it look like if it looked better?'(Egan) Egan points out that new scenarios are not 'wild eyed, idealistic state of affairs, but rather a picture of a problem situation as it would be if improvements were made' (Egan)

Example 1:

The client is unhappy with his current course and wants a 'better course'.

Guidance worker: You seem to be so unhappy with your current course that I would like to ask you what would your course look like if it looked better?

Client: Well, more interesting subjects to start with, and more practical work, I don't like just sitting in the class room listening to a lecturer go on and on ...

Other clients may just have a vague feeling on what their preferred scenario would look like. It has already been established that our own beliefs can keep us in a problem situation. Guidance workers can help clients explore preferred scenarios by challenging and reviewing.

Example 2:

Guidance worker: 'You seem to be unsure about taking a full-time course. Let's imagine you're on the course now. (Do not fire following questions one after another, but leaving client room to consider each in turn) What are you studying? What are you doing? How do you feel? Is there anything you worry about?'

Getting clients to imagine quite vividly their preferred scenario may bring to the front some of the issues that are still holding them back.

If clients have no any idea of their preferred scenario i.e. what they want, it can be helpful for them to start focusing on what they do not want and by process of elimination begin to clarify their preferred scenario.

Step 2B: Creating viable agendas

Agendas turn preferred scenario possibilities into something concrete to work with. 'The agenda is viable that it is stated in terms of clear and specific outcomes and is a substantive response to the presenting problem or opportunity, realistic, in keeping with the client's values, and capable of being accomplished within a reasonable time frame' (Egan).

The example client from Step 2A has already stated what would improve the quality of the course for him; however he is still vague about 'interesting subjects' and 'practical work'. In order to make the agenda more specific, which will enable the client to develop strategies, the guidance worker needs to ask him to clarify.

Example:

Guidance worker: Would you be more specific what you mean by interesting subjects and practical work?

Client: Well, I find subjects like management and business more interesting than human resources. And I want to see a connection between what I learn and the real world. With practical work I mean placements or at least working on real business problems with real business people.

Step 2C: Choice and Commitment

Implementing change is never easy. How many of us have taken up New Year's Resolutions without ever seeing them through? If the agenda is not strong enough for clients to take action, guidance workers can help clients search for more incentives that will keep them on their desired path. However, ultimately the choice and commitment remain the responsibility of the client.

Incentives could include:

- the current situation is too painful to be in
- the sense of achievement once the goal has been reached
- a feeling of being in control of one's own life
- respect from people, client holds in high regard
- better financial prospects

Stage 3 - Formulating Strategies and Plans

Help clients develop action strategies for accomplishing goals, that is, for getting from the current to the preferred scenario

Step 3A: Brainstorming strategies for action

The question here is 'How can I reach my goal?' There is usually more than one way and guidance workers should encourage clients to explore all possible options. As Egan points out, one reason for people failing to reach their goals is 'that they do not explore the different ways in which the goal can be accomplished. They choose one means or strategy without a great deal of exploration or reflection, try it, and when it fails, conclude that they just can't achieve that particular goal' (Egan).

The various problem-solving techniques of brainstorming, force-field analysis, SWOT analysis and mindmapping will be explored in a separate session later on.

An overall goal can also be broken down into smaller, 'bitesize' goals, if it seems too overwhelming or too unmanageable within a reasonable framework.

Step 3B: Choosing the best strategies

Having explored all possible options, with the help of the guidance worker clients review which ones suit their personal circumstances, values, resources, experience, preferences etc. best. That also means that the chosen strategy or strategies are realistic.

Guidance workers need to be aware that strategies are chosen by the client from within their own frame of reference. Therefore clients who have not been very confident in the past or who fears rejection may go for a strategy that does not take them as close to their goal as other strategies. Alternatively, in

order to stretch themselves other clients may choose a strategy that carries the risk of failure. Whatever the situation, guidance workers can help clients through challenging and reviewing their choices. The responsibility, however, rests with the clients and their decisions needs to be respected, even if guidance workers feel other options would be more suitable. And if the clients' strategies do fail, making mistakes is a valuable learning process.

Step 3C: Turning strategies into a plan

This is the final step and learners will be introduced to action planning later on. Drawing up a plan is 'a step-by-step procedure of accomplishing each goal of the preferred scenario' (Egan). The question here is 'What action do I now need to take?' Keeping to a time frame helps clients focus on the activity e.g. 'by next week I will have found out whether I can change course and what the implications are'. However, clients and guidance workers need to bear in mind that the best plans can go awry due to unforeseen circumstances, therefore regular reviews and flexibility are very important