

How to Survive Counselling Training: A Student's Guide

Rory Lees-Oakes



Preface

Hello and welcome to the new and updated version of *How to Survive Counselling Training: A Student's Guide!*

Originally published in 2013 and updated in 2018, this e-book been downloaded thousands of times. I hope that this updated edition answers some of your questions around training to be a counsellor and what it entails.

This updated edition has a more detailed overview regarding UK training requirements, and addresses the changing way in which students are accessing information for assignments and practice-related issues.

It also includes an invitation to join our dedicated counselling training [Facebook group](#) and our weekly [podcast](#) for students of counselling and psychotherapy.

I also invite you to take a look at the [Counselling Study Resource](#), probably the largest online library in the world dedicated to supporting students studying on counselling or psychotherapy courses.

Once you have passed your fitness to practise, you might like to consider our [Online and Telephone Counselling certificate course](#). Expert-designed and led, this online course is tailored not only to your learning needs but also to your budget.

And when you are qualified, we also have [Counsellor CPD](#), offering hundreds of hours of on-demand CPD lectures, training and resources to support your continuing professional development.

This e-book isn't our only book – I'll tell you about our three full-length published books, which you'll likely find invaluable in your counselling studies and subsequent practice.

Warm regards



Rory Lees-Oakes

CounsellingTutor.com

Contents

Preface	2
1. About Counselling Tutor	4
2. Useful Resources	6
3. Study Hacks	11
4. Self-Care	12
5. Finding a Supervisor	13
6. Finding a Placement.....	15
7. The First Client Contact	22
8. Will I Change?	27
9. Frequently Asked Questions	28
10. About the Author	35

1. About Counselling Tutor

What first led you to train in – or to be thinking about training in – counselling? If it was because you wanted to make a difference, then you're among friends here. We share your desire to make a difference in the lives of clients who choose to visit a counsellor.

The pain of someone who – feeling emotional pain – reaches out to a counsellor is contagious, with those close to them experiencing the pain by proxy. Effective counsellors enable clients to shift deep emotion, help process pain, and find or re-find a more accepting and enjoyable life – while ineffective counsellors can leave the client feeling even worse, like they have failed and hope has gone.

We know that, by educating counsellors and helping them sharpen their skillset, their service to clients will be improved. The positive effects will help others too. We call this 'the golden ripple effect'.

The Digital Counselling Revolution

In both counselling study and practice, online working has many benefits for students, practitioners and clients: convenience, time efficiency, cost effectiveness and flexibility. It also brings certain challenges: using technology, maintaining motivation and managing remote relationships.

As experts in online learning – with decades of relevant experience between us – we can help you make best use of these benefits and overcome these challenges, supporting your studies and practice.

Connection, Service, Passion

These three core values run through how we behave towards each other, our clients and our customers:

- We listen, trying to understand without judgement.
- We are who we say we are, and are always honest even when this is hard.
- We do what is right, not what is easy, and we never compromise our values.
- We ask for help and give help, supporting each other to be our best selves.
- We do what we say we will.

Professional Relationships

In true connective spirit, we have working links with a number of other organisations in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, for example:

- We are an organisational member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (**BACP**), and our Online and Telephone Counselling course meets the BACP competence framework requirements for practitioners who wish to work with clients via telephone and e-counselling.
- We collaborated with the Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body (**CPCAB**) on a regular section – ‘Check-in with CPCAB’ – in our weekly podcast during the 2019/20 academic year.
- Our Online and Telephone Counselling course has been awarded Quality Checked training recognition by the National Counselling Society (**NCS**).
- We are a recognised Online Training Provider with the Association for Counselling and Therapy Online (**ACTO**).

2. Useful Resources

Why not take the time to have a look at our full range of resources? They are all designed to make your learning journey stress-free.



Counselling Tutor

Counselling Tutor is the leading website supplying free information to students of counselling and psychotherapy. Why not try out our search tool?

[Click here to visit and browse the latest updates.](#)



Counselling Search Engine

Use this special tool to search for a topic you want to find out more about – you'll be amazed how many resources pop up!

[Click here to visit the home page of our website, where you'll find this search engine.](#)



Counselling Tutor Podcast

In our free weekly term-time podcast, Ken and Rory discuss a wide range of counselling-related topics.

[Click here to catch up with the latest episodes.](#)



Counselling Tutor YouTube Channel

We have a huge number and range of videos on all things counselling, which you can watch on demand on YouTube.

[Click here to start viewing.](#)



Online and Telephone Counselling Introduction Course

This ten-hour course is free to access and gives you the basic information you need to work safely and ethically using online technology during social distancing.

[Click here to register for our free course.](#)



Certificate in Online and Telephone Counselling

Once you're in placement (or signed off as fit to practise), you can sign up to our full, paying 80-hour course.

The learning outcomes are mapped to the BACP competences for telephone and e-counselling.

[Click here to find out more.](#)



Counselling Tutor Booklist

We have set up this part of our site to offer the books recommended on Counselling Tutor courses at specially reduced prices.

[Click here to get started.](#)

Join Us on Social Media



[Counselling Tutor Facebook Group](#)

Join discussions and connect with fellow counsellors and students by joining our Facebook group.

Want More? Then Check Out...



[Counselling Study Resource](#)

Your online resource contains lectures, handouts and access to the live bi-weekly lectures and CPD certificates. Members especially like the student roadmap (signposting what you need to meet criteria for your course), and study help lectures (e.g. on cracking the criteria, Bloom's verbs, and referencing).

[Click here to find out more.](#)

[Counsellor CPD](#)

Our online library offers hundreds of hours of on-demand CPD lectures, training and resources to support your continuing professional development.

[Click here to read more about this valuable resource.](#)

What Participants Think

Counselling Study Resource

I just wanted to say how impressed I am with this study resource. It's absolutely fantastic. Thanks for creating it! David

Now I am properly up and running, I am really starting to appreciate how good CSR is, but more importantly, what a superb and understanding organisation you are, with a fantastic innovative management team. Ray

I'm starting a 4-year psychotherapy course in a couple of weeks. I've found your lectures and videos very helpful. Janice

Counsellor CPD

After being in practice for many years, this has got to be the best value CPD I have ever undertaken. Gill

The format of the training really suits me as it means I do not have to read reams of information. I can listen to the information as well as read the concise PowerPoints. Rachel

Extremely easy to follow whether on a phone, tablet or computer. There is always one of the team on hand to support our learning. Emma

Online and Telephone Counselling

I thoroughly enjoyed the course and found it very useful for all the online work that I am now doing. I have also recommended it to many colleagues and my supervisor, who was most impressed with the content and execution by Ken and Rory. Janis

I am so, so pleased I followed your course. It has allowed me to safely and confidently carry on working throughout these last months. I may well have far more 'on-line' clients rather than face-to-face ones in the future!!! I am recommending you to all my supervisees! Jill

Fabulous content. Well-spaced between modules to avoid overload of information. Neil

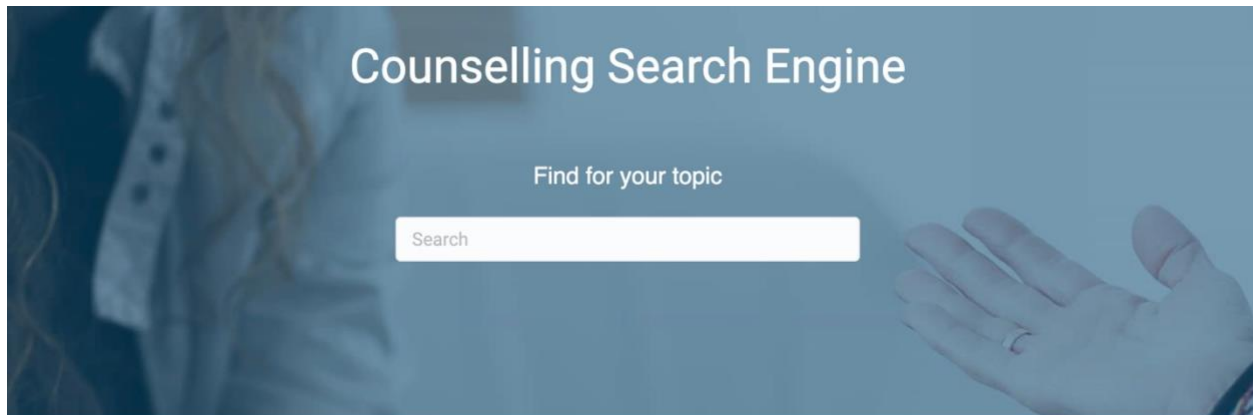
Referencing

Citing Resources

If you use any of our resources as a source of information for an assignment, please ensure you include it in your references.

We use the Harvard style of referencing, but your learning institution might require you to do it a different way: check your course handbook or ask your tutor.

[Click here to find help with referencing](#), or use the link on the home page of the Counselling Tutor website, just under the Counselling Search Engine:



Need to reference a resource on Counselling Tutor?

[Click Here for Referencing](#)



3. Study Hacks

Technology has enabled students to take control of their learning in different and creative ways. Below are several 'study hacks' that you can use to 'supercharge' your learning and save valuable time!

Use your phone

Your phone is a powerhouse of learning technology. Use it to photograph flipcharts you create in breakout sessions, notes written in class, or PowerPoint slides that the tutor puts up on the board.

Ask your tutor's permission to record the theory lectures using the voice recorder.

Transcribe your recordings

When you have captured the sound, go to <https://sonix.ai/>, upload the file, and it will transcribe it for you (you get 30 minutes free of charge).

Cite quotes without buying books

Finding the right quotes can be time-consuming and frustrating, but there is an easy hack. Go to <https://books.google.co.uk/> and type in a phrase or a quote you are looking to cite. Hit the return key, and a list of books containing the phrase or quote will appear.

Make referencing easy

Referencing can be one of the most challenging aspects of assignment writing. A simple app called MyBib can make referencing a breeze. Just type in the name of the book and page number, press enter, and your reference is generated.

Using technology can make your learning experience less stressful and save you much-needed time.

4. Self-Care

In my experience, most counsellors are very good at getting others to exercise self-care while neglecting their own needs. Part of this, I suspect, is down to the societal values placed on counsellors. For example, how many times have friends, relatives, students and clients reflected to me that 'you're all right: as a counsellor, you are sorted out': I wish!

A learner once asked me what would happen if my next-door neighbour knocked on my door and asked me for some counselling. I replied that I would respectfully and politely decline to be their counsellor, and would offer some words of advice on where they could access the services they need. My learner looked appalled, before saying: 'Rory, I think you are really mean. My next-door neighbour was a counsellor and she would help anyone in distress.' The learner then added, without a hint of irony: 'Mind you, she did have a couple of nervous breakdowns.'

It is very easy to let the work we do define us – more so when you are a student, because everywhere you look, you are reminded of the endeavour you are embarking on. You have a table full of counselling books; you are attending practice, supervision and classes; you are writing assignments; you are coping with the demands of your own personal development and the renegotiations in relationships this might bring; and on top of all that, you are holding down a job and perhaps also looking after a family. Counselling training should come with a health warning ... did I mention this?

My advice is to find time for yourself and to be thoughtful regarding who you tell about the course you are undertaking. One of my former learners was a very experienced mental-health nurse: when she went on holiday and people asked her what she did for a living, she told them that she was a secretary!

Burn-out is a real danger in the work we do, which is why it is important that we look after ourselves. Most courses have an expectation that you will attend your own therapy. Supervision is also a safety mechanism, although not a replacement for your own therapy.

Finally, find yourself a study buddy – someone you can meet up with to talk through assignments. Remember that you don't have to meet face-to-face; the virtual world allows conversations to take place on Skype and other electronic media.

Last but not least, remember that training won't last forever, but you will miss it when it finishes!

5. Finding a Supervisor

At some point, you will need to find a supervisor – so, in this section, we are going to look at how to choose a supervisor and how to get the most from supervision. This will help you give the best service to clients and retain your own sanity.

As noted earlier, most courses in the UK expect one hour of supervision for every eight hours of client work or 1.5 hours per month, whichever comes first.

Most training providers have a list of approved external supervisors, who are very experienced practitioners who have both a counselling and a supervision qualification.

So how do you choose a supervisor? Perhaps this story may be of help.

I compare my early experiences of supervision to being dipped in a bath of acid: a bit like a door that was covered in layers of old varnish and paint, and was in need of rejuvenation. I remember gleefully sharing my supervisor's name with my tutors, who turned to each other in barely masked horror before asking me: 'Are you sure?' Every month without fail, I turned up for 1.5 hours of immersion, as old attitudes, ignorance, defence mechanisms, avoidance and lack of awareness were peeled away layer by layer.

Now if all this sounds a little scary, I really believe we get the supervisors we need at the beginning of our practice life, and while other peers decided on more 'fluffy' supervision, I was more than happy with my monthly 'dunking'. The reason for this rather masochistic joy was that very early on in my counselling career, I recognised that, never having worked in the 'caring professions' (I was a commercial manager for a multinational company), I had a lot to learn and I trusted my supervisor not to dissolve me completely! About 18 months into my training, she moved to another job.

Consequently, we had to part company; I was genuinely sad to say goodbye. Despite her rather direct approach (first session: 'Right, let's role-play reflecting and paraphrasing' – dunk, dunk, sizzle, scrape ...) I knew in my heart I could trust her. More to the point, I knew my clients would be safe in her hands, as she taught me how they could be safe in mine.

I arrived at my new supervisor's office rather like a primed door, ready to have a professional 'gloss' applied, a task we have both undertaken every month for the past 12 years. In retrospect, I made a decision early in my career to be 'bright and shiny' as opposed to 'soft and fluffy'.

If there is a moral to this story, it is to trust your instincts; we will spend a lot of our counselling work helping clients trust in their own experience. It's never too early in your career to start practising what you preach.

On a practical note, your supervisor should be qualified in the same model of therapy you are practising – so if you are undertaking person-centred training, then your supervisor should have a good working knowledge of that approach.

One final thought: if you are interviewing a supervisor and find that you dislike them, talk it through with your tutor or peers. My experience is that when we take an instant dislike to someone, we are experiencing transference (the idea that something in the present is triggering a memory from the past). This can be an accent, a gesture, the way someone looks at you, how they dress or how they smell! If I meet someone I instantly dislike, I consider who from my past they remind me of, before getting to know them for the individual they are.

In counselling, there are no easy options. If you are really interested and committed to your own personal development, then start as you mean to go on: if a situation is unfamiliar or a little scary, try to gain insight into why this is. You may need to seek support from your tutors, supervisor or peers, and to engage in a deeper exploration in your own therapy.

6. Finding a Placement

Reputable counselling courses ask learners to undertake at least 100 hours of supervised client work as part of their training; this means finding a placement in an organisation that offers a counselling service where students can gain training experience. For most students, this causes great anxiety, as they have to write, email, phone and turn up to organisations to try to get a placement; it can leave learners feeling downhearted at being rejected, and sometimes a little paranoid that they won't get a placement.

A few years ago, I was sitting in the reception of my practice waiting for a client when a young man walked in and asked a member of staff: 'Do you have any counselling placements?' – to which the answer was an emphatic 'No'. Unfortunately for him, he was speaking to the cleaner, who had as much idea on counselling placements as I have about astrophysics! Consequently, he left – with no placement and a bit down in the dumps. The moral of the story is to find out who you are talking to and what their role is in the organisation!

In this section, we are going to look at strategies for gaining a placement, and ways of making sure that your application gets seen in a favourable light.

You are applying for a job

Charities (sometimes referred to as 'the third sector') are sophisticated businesses that rely on financial support from the public and from 'principal donors', such as local or national government, and the business world. As such, they want volunteers who will uphold the principles of the organisation and add value to the business, giving the general public and the funders confidence.

If all this seems a little harsh, welcome to reality: charities are businesses, so your application needs to reflect this.

Check your values

I have interviewed lots of students for placements and there is nothing worse than knowing that the person sitting in front of you has no interest in the organisation or its values: they just need a placement, and any placement will do.

Before even applying to an organisation, consider whether its values and client group are of interest to you. Do you believe that you could really make a difference in their client's lives? Counselling is about being honest and ethical. As a student, I turned down a placement working with aged people because events in my life and where I was as a person at the time led me to believe that perhaps I could not give my all to the client group.

If you have not got a valid reason to apply to the organisation other than that you need a placement, then you are wasting their time and yours!

Find the principal person

Find out the main person responsible for placements – they usually have the title of volunteer co-coordinator or practice manager (from now on, I will refer to them as ‘the principal’). You can do this by looking on the website of the organisation, and you can phone to confirm. Make sure that you get the principal's email address, work phone number and postal address. At this point, you don't need to talk to the principal: you just need to confirm their name and contact details. I'll say more on this later.

Do your homework

As I noted above, because charities are a business, there is an expectation that you will know about them, what they stand for and what they do. Bear in mind that you are not going to an interview for a commercial position. So while knowing the annual turnover, staff ratios and funding streams may sound impressive, you may be a bit wide of the mark since you are applying for a counselling placement.

Focus instead on issues that are relevant to your application, such as the impact of the charity on the local community, its reputation with your peers on the course, the client group it works with, and any positive feedback you have heard locally or from friends and family who have used the service. Do be thoughtful of confidentiality here – i.e. don't say: ‘My friend Bill Smith had six sessions of counselling here and found it very useful’!

Also, discuss any fundraising initiatives that have caught your eye. One student I interviewed a few years ago thought it was hilarious that my charity had turned part of Tesco's car park into a tropical paradise, which included a beach, palm trees and volunteers dressed in Hawaiian shirts offering non-alcoholic cocktails to bemused shoppers! This kind of interaction at an interview really makes a difference.

Take a smart approach

Principals are inundated with enquiries from prospective student counsellors, phone calls, emails, and people turning up without an appointment. Most will not admit publicly that students can sometimes be a bit distracting to their work. So you need to be smart ...

By now, you should have the principal's name, email address, phone number and postal address. First of all, forget contact by phone: this is the easiest but least productive method. Most principals work part-time, and spend the working day with clients, or in meetings or client assessments. In other words, they will not be sitting by the phone waiting for you to call. If you do get through, they will probably be between meetings and have very little time to talk.

So it's better to use an old-fashioned (but tried and tested) method of communication: the humble letter. I will explain why later. The secret of good communication is to impart as much information as you can in the shortest possible time. Here's a sample letter:

*22 New Bank Gardens
Bridge Town
BL3 4NM
3 January 2018*

Dear Ms Hassan,

I am a Counselling Diploma student in my first year of the two-year level 4 programme at Bridge Town College. My reason for writing to you is to enquire when you will be interviewing for counselling placements.

I am a Student Member of the BACP, have indemnity insurance, and have been passed as fit-to-practise by my college tutor Rory Lees-Oakes, who will provide a letter to that effect.

Last year, I obtained my level 3 certificate in counselling skills at Bridge Town College, having completed level 2 the previous year.

I am attracted to your organisation because [give valid and honest reasons here – you could include any relevant work or volunteering experience, if applicable].

I can be available at short notice as I only live ten minutes away by car. I can be contacted at the above address or by email at Jmills@powermail.co.uk. My mobile number is 07777 7777.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Mills

In this letter, you have answered most questions that the principal would initially want to ask. In just five short paragraphs, you have shared the following valuable information:

- your course, course level, previous qualifications, college and tutor
- professional obligations, such as professional membership and insurance
- the fact that you are 'good to go' (passed ready for practice) and can evidence this
- what attracts you to the organisation
- previous experience (if applicable)
- availability and location in relation to the organisation.

The reason for writing a letter initially is that letters are hard to ignore. They hang around the principal's desk. If you use a good-quality piece of paper and envelope, your letter will demand immediate attention.

The next stage of contact is to send an email, a week later (if you have not heard anything in the meantime), which might read like this:

To: Vhassan@charityone.co.uk

From: Jmills@powermail.co.uk

Re my letter

Dear Ms Hassan,

Please excuse my email so soon after I have written to you; I thought you may find it useful to have a return email address.

Kind regards,

Jenny Mills

What you have done here is to raise awareness of your letter; if it was not received or if it got stuck in the post-room, then the principal will go and find it or email you to ask what it was about. If the principal has received your letter, then it might trigger a quick response by email. Notice how the email is 'reader-centred' – i.e. 'I thought **you** might find it useful.' This technique makes it easier for the principal to respond.

Between the letter and the email, you have just made the principal's life easier; they get lots of enquiries from prospective placement counsellors. You have supplied valuable decision-making information in your letter and a fast method of response in your email. If only all students were as smart as you! 😊

If you don't get a follow-up, give it another week, then phone the organisation to see whether the principal is still working there or is on extended leave. If the latter, then find out who is covering the work and write a new letter (and then email after another week if need be).

Finally, remember the old adage: the squeaky wheel gets the grease! In other words, be persistent, but in a respectful and constructive way.

Other routes to placements

Bearing in mind my earlier comments on values, some students volunteer for an organisation before they enter counselling training. This has many advantages, such as giving back to your community, and making a difference to individuals who (perhaps like you) have had or are having difficulties in their lives.

One of the main advantages of 'volunteering early' is that you get to see how the organisation works and what its values are, and to meet colleagues who may prove useful contacts in the future. More to the point, when counselling placements are available, you will have a good understanding of the organisation – plus you will know the people interviewing you.

If all the above seems a little contrived, again I say: welcome to the real world!

Preparing for interview

In my experience both as a student and tutor, one of the greatest sources of student angst is searching for a placement, especially if all your peers are getting into practice and you are still waiting to start. The self-inflicted pressure that some students go through can be quite destructive, leading in turn to a fantasy of having to have the perfect interview, and the associated stress that comes with this.

So, in this section, we are looking to swap stress for knowledge and competence, which will lead to you obtaining your goal of a placement. We will also look at things such as interview structures, dress codes and questions you are likely to be asked.

So, first things first: don't try to blag it! The individuals on an interview panel will be counsellors or involved in counselling at some level. Consequently, they will be good judges of character and will be able to tell if you are not being truthful. If you don't know the answer to a question, say: 'I don't know.' This is just about the wisest answer you can give, and tells the interviewers two important things: that you are honest and that you have the confidence to be honest.

As discussed earlier, charities are business-minded and want those who work with them to reflect the ethos and values of the organisation, as experienced both by the public and by 'stakeholders' (i.e. funders). Thus, a smart-casual dress code is the order of the day; don't turn up dressed for a night out or a day on the beach! Equally, avoid suits or uniforms. If you have to wear either of these at your day job and you are going straight from work, my advice would be to change before the interview.

A good tip is to look at how employees at the organisation dress and let that guide you. Remember: interviewers will be trying to assess how you will come across to clients, and the way you dress will be a good indicator.

There are two main types of interview. In group interviews, you will be placed in a group and given a question to answer relevant to counselling, perhaps relating to confidentiality or an ethical dilemma, such as: 'Is touch appropriate in counselling?' What the interviewers are looking for here is how you interact with others: are you co-operative or defensive? Do you value others' opinions, even if they are different to your own? In other words, can you work as part of a team and challenge appropriately?

At the group interview I attended for my diploma course, we were asked: ‘When would you break confidentiality?’ As we were debating, one member of the group started wagging his finger at another, stating in a loud voice: ‘I have a big problem with that.’ Needless to say, he did not get a place on the course.

Individual interviews usually involve sitting in front of a panel of interviewers (usually three people) who will ask you questions, covering the following topics:

- what attracts you to the organisation
- what course and college you are attending
- your availability/how much time can you offer the organisation
- confidentiality and ethics
- equality and diversity
- self-care – how you look after yourself and what you do outside of counselling
- your strengths and weaknesses.

At the end, the interviewers may ask whether you have any questions about the organisation. Questions such as ‘How many counsellors work here?’ and ‘Do you have different modalities of therapy available?’ are thoughtful ones and demonstrate that you have a wider interest in the organisation outside getting a placement.

At the end of the interview, you may be asked for a fitness-to-practise letter (sometimes known as a ‘letter of comfort’), which is written to the organisation from your tutor on headed paper, stating that in their opinion you are ready to work with clients.

You will probably be told that the organisation will be in touch if you are successful. If you are, that’s great! If not, ask for feedback: remember that you can learn more from a defeat than a victory.

It has to be said that not all organisations interview like this, but – as I always say to learners – ‘Hope for the best; prepare for the worst!’

7. The First Client Contact

No amount of training, skills-practice work, life experience or book-reading will fully prepare you for the first contact with a client. Even reading this section will not prepare you adequately! However, I hope to give you some insights into the difference between ‘playing’ at being at the counsellor and ‘being’ a counsellor, so first things first.

When I use the term ‘playing’, I am referring to the hours you spend practising your skills or making tapes with peers on your course. One of the things you need to consider is that all the people you train with ‘know the rules’ – for example, time boundaries, confidentiality, and modality of therapy. In particular, you have the safety net of the group and the tutors if your skills session doesn’t go to plan.

Most clients, in my experience, know very little about the mechanics of therapy; they just want help and support. In the paragraphs below, I highlight the differences between ‘playing and ‘doing’, along with some practical advice on how to work with the difference.

Making an initial appointment

At some point, your agency will give you the phone number of a client. Always try to use the agency’s phone to make contact; if you do have to use your home or personal mobile number, make sure you ‘block’ the number; I know of at least one colleague who forgot to do this and ended up having to take quite a difficult call from a client in the middle of a romantic dinner with her partner.

When you contact a client to make the first appointment, say who you are and whether it is convenient to speak. Remember that the client may be socialising with friends or family, and may not want them to know they are receiving counselling: confidentiality starts at the first contact.

Contracting

In class, you have probably rehearsed contracting. You may have a little script that you use; as you go through it, your peer sits quietly, nodding their head before speaking. In practice, however, what may happen is that your client just wants to share their story. Before you can finish, they are laying their life out in front of you.

The way to deal with this is to be patient, allow the client to speak, and work with the material. If a pause comes, reaffirm those parts of the contract that are non-negotiable, such as limits to confidentiality. You can always revisit the contract at the next session, but be sure the client knows when the next appointment is (having appointment cards can be helpful).

Time boundaries

In training, both you and your peers understand the nature of time boundaries, so most skills sessions finish on time. In the real world of counselling, some clients may decide that 50 minutes is not enough and continue on with their story, even when you say: 'We have come to an end.' Most novice counsellors find this difficult to deal with at first: through training, they have been told to offer a high level of respect to clients, and so it feels rude or uncaring to interrupt them.

In my first year of practice, I had a client who – when I mentioned that we had come to the end of the session – would reply 'Yes, yes' before carrying on for another five or ten minutes. Eventually, I took this to my supervisor (dunk, dunk, sizzle, scrape ...); she reflected to me that my boundaries needed to be 'adjusted' (OK, I am paraphrasing here). She suggested challenging the client by asking why she carried on talking when the session had finished. As a novice therapist, I found this a bit scary. However, at our next session, I broached the subject and found the response quite amazing. My client went deep into thought before replying that no one had ever challenged her before; she was used to being 'in charge'. In that short exchange, the real therapeutic work began. In the next few weeks, we explored 'letting go' (allowing others to take charge when appropriate) and how she used the control to hide those parts of her life that she did not want to face.

This interaction would not have taken place in skills practice at college because the relationship between your peers and your clients is vastly different. Clients see you as a helpful stranger: someone with whom they have no shared history. Your peers will know a lot more about you than a client would. More to the point, you are practising skills in training, as opposed to building a therapeutic alliance.

Leakage

A client may be so desperate to speak to someone that when you phone up to make an appointment, they start immediately to tell you their story. The difficulty with this is that you don't wish to be disrespectful by telling them to stop. However, you don't really want to offer a telephone counselling service with no time limit.

The way to work with this is to acknowledge that the client has a story to tell, reflecting to them that this is why you are contacting them to make an appointment. You could shape your response like this: 'I can hear that you have a lot to discuss. Perhaps we could explore some of the issues you are talking about when we meet on Wednesday; is that OK?' In that short sentence, you have acknowledged the client and their story, and given them a time and a place for them to fully explore the issues that are troubling them.

Clients who don't come back

One of the more difficult aspects of being a student counsellor is when clients do not return for a second or subsequent appointment, you can feel inadequate. This is known in the 'trade' as FOI ('feelings of incompetence'). As a trainer, I have on a number of occasions found myself removing metaphorical cudgels from the heads of my learners as they beat themselves up because a client did not return.

Most counsellors will tell you of a least one client with whom they had a really good relationship but who didn't return, and of how they reflected that something they did or said might have contributed to that decision.

The writer John Shlien, a student of Carl Rogers and himself a well-known and respected therapist, reflected that the client has a 'right to fail in therapy'. Shlien believed that each person knew everything about themselves. Thus, clients sometimes come to realise that the source of their problems is within them: they know the truth, they know what they have to do, but are not yet ready or able to move on.

For example, a client lived in a loveless marriage, because she did not want the consequences of leaving her husband. For her, being wealthy and miserable was a better prospect than being happy and poor. Once she understood this, she never returned to therapy or answered any of my letters. I later reflected in supervision that perhaps the time we spent together may have prepared her for the next stage in her life – so that, in the future, she might choose to see another therapist when she is ready to move on.

A few years ago, I had a client who wanted someone to hear and bear testament to his story for one session. When he made a second appointment, we both knew that he would not return. He had got what he needed: another human to share his world for one hour of his life.

So there you have it: client work is varied and unpredictable, and sometimes has no satisfactory conclusion for the counsellor or the client. It is very different from skills practice.

One final word on DNAs (people who ‘did not attend’): if you are having a lot of clients failing to return, it is worth taking this to supervision and to your tutor. We all go through spells of clients not returning. However, we are obliged ethically to consider why this is and whether we may be a contributing factor in some way. Rigorous self-examination is sometimes needed to discover what we are projecting to our clients and how they may experience us. Hopefully, this will be undertaken in a supportive supervisory environment.

Gifts

There are few things that strike more fear and panic into the heart of a student counsellor than a client turning up for the final session with a box of Quality Street* and a bunch of flowers: the ethical debates I have had to sit through over the years as students wrung their hands in angst over what to do with a potted plant or chocolates given to them by a grateful client!

Let me put this into perspective. A few years ago, while working in the commercial world, I met a guy on a training course who had a very fancy Rolex wristwatch, with a retail value in excess of £4,000. He saw me admiring it and we struck up a conversation.

It transpired that a few years before, he had worked in the state of Brunei. The Sultan was in the habit of turning up with his entourage, who proceeded to hand out Rolex watches to staff and workers as a thank-you gift!

When I reflected how generous this was, the guy laughed out loud before reminding me that the Sultan was a multi-billionaire and so that giving away expensive jewellery was the equivalent of him or me dishing out sweets.

The moral of the story is to consider scale: what might seem expensive to you or me may be relatively inexpensive to a wealthy client. Even so, it’s not the gift but rather how it may be perceived by others that could cause difficulty. So here are some tried and trusted ways of dealing with gifting.

First of all, some organisations may have a policy on gifts. Consequently, you may be barred from taking any item from a client, no matter how small. So, before you start your placement, make sure you read the policies and procedures.

If you are allowed to accept appropriate gifts, you may find the following observations useful:

- If you are given a plant, flowers or chocolates, say ‘thank you’ and perhaps comment on how nice it will be to put them in the practice room or communal area so that ‘everyone can enjoy them’.
- With jewellery, this is a bit trickier. If the item is low-cost, then thank the client very much and when they have gone, speak to the service manager. In some cases, I have known agencies to return gifts or donate them to charity. If the client turns up with a bag emblazoned with the logo ‘Graff’, ‘Tiffany’ or ‘Lacroix’, then I would strongly suggest that you decline and perhaps ask your client to speak with the principal.
- As for money, if a client offers you money outside of the fee structure for you or the organisation, then you need to say a polite ‘no’ and again speak with the principal.

Most agencies have a ‘gift log’: a book in which gifts are registered, and what action was taken on receiving or declining them is recorded.

Remember: always show the core conditions and be as gentle as possible if you have to decline a gift. Also, consider the nightmare scenario of a relative turning up to the agency with the press in tow, demanding to know why his granny has given the family silver to her counsellor.

The reality of gifts is that you will seldom receive them. In my career to date, I have received a bag of toilet rolls** and lots of cards. And yes, I declared the toilet rolls in the gift book and donated them to the agency!

* For the international audience, ‘Quality Street’ refers to a large family-size box or tin of chocolates popular in the UK.

** My client cried so much in the early sessions that she went through boxes and boxes of tissues. In the end, she turned up with a toilet roll in her handbag because it was ‘better value’!

8. Will I Change?

The Greek philosopher Socrates stated: ‘The unexamined life is not worth living.’ My interpretation of this is that, as humans, we don’t come with an instruction book. So it is up to each individual to try to make sense of our place in the world and how we relate to others and, by doing so, to live an honourable life.

We are a book whose chapters are being written every day of our lives, and it’s up to us to make sure that the entries are written by us in as honest a way as possible, so that when we look back on our lives, we can view the paths that led us to who we are today.

Counselling training gives us one of the greatest opportunities to be ourselves that we will ever encounter, and has facilitated change in almost everyone I trained with or have trained. I always remark to prospective learners that counselling courses should come with a health warning!

Through training, we become more honest with ourselves, and more trusting of our own needs and feelings. Consequently, we may need to renegotiate our relationships with friends, colleagues and loved ones. In some cases, this could mean ending friendships and relationships that no longer fit with who you are. It could also mean that you become more accepting of people and more tolerant of their attitudes.

Through years of facilitating process groups (also known as ‘personal development’ – or PD – groups), I have seen how ‘examining one’s life’ can alter individuals’ perceptions of themselves in a way they never thought possible. However, change is not always an easy road as it can lead to some difficult decisions, especially in affairs of the heart. In the diploma group I trained with, there were a lot of separations and divorces amongst my peers, as well as honest appraisals of relationships, leading to new and happier beginnings for both parties.

I also believe that the impact of client work has a profound effect; working with the human condition in all its forms gives a unique view into the inequalities of the world. One of the greatest lessons it has taught me is that life is rarely fair or equitable. This knowledge has been of great benefit to me as I can now view difficulties in my own life with both clarity and reality.

So, yes, training will change you; however, the person you are becoming is in your own hands, along with your destiny. It might also be worth remembering that friends and loved ones are not undertaking the same journey of personal development; thus, they may find it a bit of a challenge getting to know the ‘new’ you!

9. Frequently Asked Questions

As a former lecturer in counselling for over a decade, I had the pleasure of helping students to realise their goals of becoming qualified counsellors, and in some cases to find paid employment. Through those years, some questions asked by prospective students tended to come up again and again. They could be the questions you would like to ask. So, here are my responses to the most frequently asked questions put to me by prospective students.

Q: *Are counsellors born?*

A: This is a question that was sometimes asked when I was interviewing prospective students who wished to undertake training. The implication is that some humans may have an inbuilt capacity to be therapists from birth. If we take the question at face value, we could also ask: ‘Are motor mechanics or accountants born?’

My view is that we are the sum total of our upbringing, life experience, brain structure and personal philosophy. Throughout our lives, we are a work in progress; we may need a bit of help during this journey, and many counsellors have come to the profession because of their own experiences of undergoing therapy.

The term ‘wounded healer’ can find its origins in Greek mythology, as told in the story of Chiron (pronounced ‘Kiron’) – a centaur (mythical being that is part-human and part-horse) who was wounded by an arrow dipped in the blood of the Hydra (a multi-headed serpent). This arrow was inadvertently shot at Chiron by the god Hercules while out on a hunting trip. Consequently, Chiron spent an eternity in pain trying to find a cure for himself, and – by default – a cure for others. This is what is known in psychological circles as an ‘archetype’: an individual whose life experience has set them on a road to help others, usually in the way in which they were helped.

So the answer to the question ‘Are counsellors born?’ is ‘No’: my experience and research would indicate that it is rather a ‘rebirth’, leading some people to want to find a completion in their lives by helping others. Not everyone comes to counselling training with a difficult past. However, in my experience, most do – whether or not they realise it.

Q: Can anyone become a counsellor?

A: Perhaps this question is better addressed by the old adage that counselling is as much a way of being as a way of doing.

A few years ago, I got into a debate with the awarding body that validates the courses I was teaching. They wanted to reclassify empathy as a skill, but I argued empathy is a human attribute that cannot be taught. (The awarding body thought differently and reclassified it anyway.)

I did point out that I had previously worked within the criminal justice system and had met a number of ex-offenders who had been diagnosed as having psychopathy – in other words, no feelings of empathy for other people. No amount of training or teaching techniques could instil into them feelings for others. Basically, you had to work the ‘consequence card’, which went a bit like: ‘If you do that again, you will spend longer in prison next time.’

So, to summarise, we can teach a way of doing that comprises skills and techniques. However, a way of being – the moral attributes demonstrated as empathy, being genuine and non-judgemental – can be nurtured in training but have to be present in the individual at some level before they start on a course.

Crucially, counselling trainees should be seeking ‘meaning’ in their own lives, which can manifest itself by the student becoming to understand themselves better and being able to separate what is their ‘stuff’ and what is projected onto them by others.

Q: I am having counselling; can I train to be a counsellor?

A: It would be an odd profession that did not take students who have had or are having counselling. My view, as a trainer, would be that if you are undergoing a significant life event such as bereavement, divorce or maybe a difficult illness, then perhaps it might not be the right time to undertake training. There are of course exceptions, but my advice would be to talk this through with your tutor at interview.

Q: What do I need to do to become a counsellor?

A: ‘It’s easy being a counsellor; you just have to sit and listen to people’s problems and give a bit of advice.’

Yes, this is a real-life answer from a prospective learner to my question: ‘Why do you want to become a counsellor?’!

If you want to enter counselling training, be realistic. Most courses last at least four years, with some as long as seven. Counselling training in the United Kingdom usually starts with a ten-week taster course, on which you will learn skills and theory, gain an understanding of the professional aspects of the work, and start the process of personal development, asking yourself: what in my life do I want to change or enhance?

Q: *What training do I need?*

A: At the time of writing (January 2018), counselling in the UK is not a regulated profession. This means there are a bewildering amount of options available to prospective students.

One of the questions I get asked on a regular basis is: ‘Which are the best training options to become a counsellor?’ The British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP), which is one of the lead ethical bodies in the world of counselling and psychotherapy, offers the following advice to prospective trainees:

We recommend a three-stage training structure.

Stage 1: Introduction to Counselling

[level 2 on the [National Qualifications Framework](#)]

An introductory course will help you gain basic counselling skills and give you an overview of what counselling/psychotherapist training involves before you commit fully. These courses are usually run at Further Education (FE) colleges and adult education centres and last between eight to 12 weeks.

Stage 2: Certificate in Counselling Skills

[level 3 on the National Qualifications Framework]

This second stage will develop your counselling skills and give you a deeper understanding of counselling theories, ethics and self-awareness. These courses also usually run at local FE colleges and adult education centres and are generally one year part-time.

This level of training is also useful for those who do not plan to become counsellors but whose job involves advising or helping people.

Stage 3: Diploma in Counselling or Psychotherapy

[minimum of level 4 on the National Qualifications Framework]

Your core practitioner training should be at the minimum level of a Diploma in Counselling and Psychotherapy but could be a degree, masters or doctorate.

To meet the requirements for BACP membership, this course must be a minimum of one year full-time or two years part-time, be classroom-based and have a minimum of 100 hours in a supervised placement as an integral part of the course.

You don't have to take all three stages, but courses have different entry requirements in terms of previous training or experience; for example, if you've been involved in counselling in a previous job, you may be able to start at Stage 2.

If you're unsure, contact a course provider at the appropriate stage and ask about their requirements.

Source: BACP website: <https://www.bacp.co.uk/student/training.php>

Note: Scotland has a separate qualifications framework; see <https://eal.org.uk/support/document-library/7-uk-qualifications-comparison-table/file>

Q: What about online training?

A: This question comes up a lot. The direct answer is that I am not aware of any online-only qualification, at any level, that on completion would allow for employment as a counsellor with a reputable service such as the NHS, or would allow full membership of an ethical body such as the BACP or the National Counselling Society (NCS).

If you want more information on counselling training from those who are currently studying or employed in the profession, join our [Facebook group](#) now and link up with 15,000 other trainees, tutors and qualified counsellors. You will be very welcome!

Q: I am not very good at writing assignments and was a bit hopeless at school. Can I still train as a counsellor?

A: Me too! At the time of writing this guide, I am approaching my 60th birthday; up until the age of 42, I had no qualifications worth taking to an interview. My handwriting is still so poor that I would be better dipping a dying beetle in ink and letting it crawl along the page. Trust me: the results would be more legible! I gave my learners great

amusement with my creative spelling on PowerPoint presentations – and even more hilarity when I wrote the answers on the board (that’s why I used to let them do it!).

Over the last 20 years, teaching techniques and a better understanding of how we learn have led to a revolution in education. Modern teaching has done away with the dunce’s cap and replaced it with the computer, better teacher training – and, best of all, the word processor, which ~~Korrects spelling and grandma~~ corrects spelling and grammar (most of the time).

Most colleges and universities undertake initial assessment to work out what level you are learning at, and can identify whether – like me – you are dyslexic. Assignment support can be put in place to help you; sometimes, enrolling on a short course to brush up on your English skills (if that is the language you write in) can do the trick.

Just remember: there is no substitute for hard work but hey: is something obtained without effort worth anything?

Q: How much will it cost to train?

A: This depends on what level you study at and how much the course provider charges. Some college or university courses are eligible for student loans for level 3 upwards and most allow you to pay in instalments.

On level 2, you can usually get by through using the course handouts, so no other costs are generally incurred apart from travelling expenses to and from your training provider.

If you progress to level 3, an additional expense is buying some books. Also, some courses have a residential element, where students go on a weekend retreat; this is usually at extra cost (i.e. on top of the course fees).

When you get to level 4, you will need to factor in buying books, joining an ethical body and taking out professional liability insurance; also, some supervisors will want to hear your client work so you may have to buy a voice recorder. Some courses have a yearly residential element, where you go offsite for the weekend; this is usually a separate cost to the course.

When you start your practice years, you will need a supervisor; this is an ethical requirement. Most courses in the UK expect one hour of supervision for every eight hours of client work or 1.5 hours per month, whichever comes first.

The lesson here is to make sure that you add up all the hidden costs before you start; your training provider should make all the costs clear to you before you enrol.

One final word on supervision: most supervisors have a sliding scale of fees, depending on your financial circumstances. If you are a student, my advice is not to be afraid to 'haggle'; at the end of the day, the worst response you will get is 'No'.

Your supervisory relationship will make the difference between having an OK experience of training and having the trip of a lifetime. Good supervision at the beginning of your career will shape you and your practice for the benefit of clients, so choose wisely. If it means paying a little more than you anticipated, consider it an investment for the future.

Q: *What books do I need, and what resources should I use?*

A: Most courses have a reading list – i.e. a selection of books that informs the curriculum and the assignment questions. Academic institutions usually have these books available in the library, but some students may prefer to purchase their own.

In recent years, students have tended to use internet resources to inform their assignments. The difficulty here is that these can be of variable quality. Online resources such as CounsellingTutor.com are considered 'authority sites', whereas online encyclopaedias (such as Wikipedia) are considered not authoritative to the point that colleges and universities will not allow you to use them as references.

Let me share a tip on buying books. If you are buying biographies and classics – like Carl Rogers' [*On Becoming a Person*](#) or [*A Way of Being*](#) – you can get bargains from auction sites, as these will never be updated apart from the introduction page (which is usually written by a popular figure in today's counselling world).

Save your money and put it toward the latest editions of books like [*Standards and Ethics in Counselling*](#) by Tim Bond, and [*Person-Centred Counselling in Action*](#) by Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne.

My colleague Bob Cooke, a trainer in transaction analysis, recommends [*TA Today*](#) by Ian Stewart and Vann Joines. These types of books are written by theorists about up-to-date issues. This is especially true for Tim Bond's book: when the BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* was updated in 2015 (and took effect in 2016), previous copies of the book became out-of-date.

Q: How do I read academic books? Reading books on counselling is hard work – they aren't like the books I take on holiday!

A: The secret of academic reading is to start with the index page at the back of the book. There, you will find in alphabetical order all the areas discussed in the book and the relevant page numbers. As you go through the course, you will look at topics (key ideas in counselling). So, if one week you are learning about congruence, turn to the index when recapping at home, look up 'congruence', and you will find the relevant material in that book.

Another technique is to 'graze' a book: in other words, just have a flick through and find something that interests you. I do this all the time and find that eventually I end up reading the entire book!

If you are getting a bit fed up with text books, then I recommend biographies or autobiographies. If well written, they can give a real insight into the human condition, as well as an understanding of how individuals grow and change. They can also help you develop empathy as you become engrossed in the person's life and enter their frame of reference.

You have to be selective: celebrity biographies are usually ghost-written and try to 'spin' the individual into a sympathetic light. Try reading about individuals who have made a contribution to the lives of 'ordinary' people. Two books that come to mind are Alex Haley's [*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*](#) (the civil rights campaigner) and the first part of Maya Angelou's autobiography, [*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*](#). Both are powerful testaments to personal growth and change.

In recent years, the term 'blended learning' has become quite a buzzword in education; students are increasingly seeking out different ways of learning using new technology.

One of the most popular ways of learning is listening to podcasts, like the one I co-host with fellow counsellor Ken Kelly. [The Counselling Tutor Podcast](#) can be downloaded onto your phone, tablet or computer. It lasts for around 35–45 minutes and is aimed at students of counselling and psychotherapy. What's more, it's free! As an added bonus, you can read the show-notes and download a handout directly to your inbox.

10. About the Author



Rory Lees-Oakes is an internet broadcaster, practising counsellor, clinical supervisor, and co-director of Counsellor Tutor Ltd. He is passionate about counselling education and helping students like you reach their learning goals.

After qualifying as a counsellor in 2004, Rory enrolled in a teacher training programme, qualifying in 2008. He taught at Tameside College before accepting the position of course leader in counselling in the higher-education faculty at Warrington Collegiate (now Warrington and

Vale Royal College). In 2014, he was appointed as a senior lecturer in counselling.

Rory teamed up with a fellow tutor, Ken Kelly, and together they created CounsellingTutor.com and the [Counselling Study Resource](#) to assist learners and fellow educators to get the best possible teaching and learning resources.

In 2015, Rory's dedication to helping students was rewarded with the Silver Plato Award for Outstanding Use of Technology in Education. He has appeared on the BBC TV programme '[Britain's Classroom Heroes](#)'.