

An Easy Introduction to Egan's Skilled Helper Solution Focused Counselling Approach

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Part One

What is it?

Gerard Egan's Skilled Helper Model of eclectically based counselling provides a structured and solution focused basis for counsellors, psychotherapists and hypno-therapists. It is a three stage model in which each state consists of specific skills that the therapist uses to help the client move forwards. By mastering the process of using these basic skills in an appropriate manner (often in a cyclical process of stage 1 - 2 - 3 evaluate 1 - 2 - 3 evaluate) the talking therapist may be able to increase their efficiency and structure their work in a more logical way, thus helping clients in a more consistent manner and being less reliant upon their fluctuating 'therapeutic inspiration'.

Theoretical Origins

Theoretically the Skilled Helper approach draws on Carkuff's theory of high-level functioning helpers (which explains that helpers with the skills of empathy, respect, concreteness, congruence, self-disclosure, confrontation and immediacy are most effective); Strong's Social influence theory (which explains that helping is a process whereby clients are influenced by others because they perceive therapists as having particular attributes and with this influence being most powerful when the the therapist avoids both laxity and coercion and is instead collaborative, empowering and democratic) and Albert Bandura's Learning theory (in which clients are seen as acquiring skills through coming to understand the processes of learning and developing appropriate self-efficacy expectations - expecting to achieve their goals by learning useful behaviours).

Essential Therapeutic Orientations

The Egan Skilled Helper approach encourages clients to become active interpreters of the world, giving meanings to actions, events and situations, facing and overcoming challenges, exploring problem issues, seeking new opportunities and establishing goals. Quite simply, success usually comes when human beings become active in initiating positive behaviours and developing problem-solving strategies.

The Skilled Helper aims to help their clients develop the skills and the knowledge necessary to solve both their current problems issues and ones that may arise in the future. To facilitate client development the helper builds a healthy therapeutic alliance with the client based on collaboration, warmth and acceptance. The Skilled Helper facilitates the client by helping them to formulate a plan of action, helping them accept their responsibility for becoming a more effective person and helping them to develop their own inner resources.

The Skilled Helper also helps their client to transfer newly acquired skills and knowledge to fresh situations, facilitates them in establishing appropriate and realistic goals (that match their problem-solving skills), encourages them to become self-directive and develop the skills of problem-solving, helps them to build on their inner strengths and to utilize external resources and support groups, helps them realize their potential and facilitates them in developing goals which are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, ethical and reasonable. Furthermore the Skilled Helper remains in a state of external sensory awareness and retains an awareness of their client's non-verbal communications.

Effective Listening - SOLER

Effective listening is key to being a Skilled Helper. It consists of various skills, which Egan covers with the acronym ***SOLER***:

- S.** If it suits them, face the client **Squarely** (some prefer up to 45 degrees etc)
- O.** Maintain an **Open Posture** with the client.
- L.** **Lean** towards the client (as appropriate).
- E.** Maintain appropriate **Eye Contact** with the client.
- R.** Be a **Relaxed** helper as by doing so you greatly improve the quality and comfort of the sessions.

Active Listening & Empathy

Active Listening is a key skill for the Skilled Helper. It consists in concentrating on the client's non-verbal and verbal communications and relating them to the client's story (non-verbal communication includes body language, expressions, reactions etc). Verbal communication articulates the client's experiences, behaviours and

feelings. The Skilled Helper encourages the client to stick to the point (what is relevant), they are non-judgemental and they are Empathic rather than sympathetic.

Appropriate Empathy is a state of human interaction in which the helper enters and understands the client's perspective, whilst getting in touch with their thoughts and feelings, however, in this the helper remains rational in their understanding of the client's situation and reality. Unlike in some counselling approaches, although the Skilled Helper communicates Empathy to the client as the basis of counselling, when appropriate they may also use challenging skills with the client when particular and clearly harmful irrational statements or destructive patterns etc keep resurfacing, however any challenging must be congruent with the maintenance of therapeutic Rapport and Empathy because Empathy and Rapport provide the client with the warmth, comfort and safety needed to facilitate effective positive change.

Exploring Skills (Egan Stage I Introduction)

Exploring the client's Existing Situation

The stage one skills of the Egan Helping Model are based upon the exploration of the client's situation and they basically correlate with the Rogerian counselling skills of the Person Centered Approach. The purpose of Stage I is to build a non-threatening counselling relationship and help the client explore their situation and then focus on chosen issues. In this stage the Skilled Helper helps the client to identify and clarify problems and opportunities and assess their resources. Clients are often reluctant or resistant at this stage, therefore the therapist helps them to explore new perspectives, challenges negative modes of thinking and constructively challenges the client's excuses, evasiveness, distortions and negative self-statements. This stage is based around helping the client in establishing priorities and developing action plans that put into practice productive strategies. Stage I exploring skills include:

- Open-ended questions
- Silence
- Focusing
- Empathy
- Paraphrasing & Reflecting Meaning
- Paraphrasing & Reflecting Feeling
- Structuring
- Summarising

Understanding Skills (Egan Stage II Introduction)

Helping the Client Establish Aims and Goals

The purpose of Stage II is to help facilitate the client in developing a more in-depth and objective understanding of their situation. This stage is enacted as the Skilled Helper assists the client in exploring options and possible goals. The Skilled Helper establishes what the client really wants and needs and the client is encouraged to consider new possibilities and perspectives, choosing ones that are realistic, consistent with their values and for which there are adequate incentives. The Skilled Helper facilitates the client in developing rational decision-making based upon healthy data collection, analysis and action planning. In this state brain-storming, divergent thinking, a balance-sheet approach and force-field analysis may be used with the client in order to facilitate choices between different ways of dealing with situations and achieving goals. These techniques help the client to explore various options and strategies as well understand and work around blocking factors with facilitating factors. Stage II understanding skills include:

- Recognising Patterns & Themes
- Alternate Frames of Reference
- Self-disclosure
- Immediacy
- Challenging
- Timing & Pacing
- Advanced empathy

Acting Skills (Egan Stage III Introduction)

Help the Client to Develop Strategies

Stage III skills are assist clients to take appropriate action by defining goals, changing ways of relating and working through issues using problem solving or decision making methods, while providing support and encouragement. Stage III skills help the client to cope with current problems and assist in the learning of new skills that will enable them to live more effectively in the future. Action is based on exploration and understanding gained by using stage I & II skills.

In stage III the Skilled Helper facilitates the client in finding ways of achieving their goals. After helping the client to come up with as many strategies as they can the Skilled Helper then helps them to focus upon those that are viable in terms of client situation, needs, aspiration and resources. This process is designed to help the client move from the current situation to one that they would prefer. Transition experiences may make the client feel vulnerable therefore the process may often be built upon the taking of small comfortable steps as the client grows in confidence (but this must be based upon the needs of the client - some like big jumps). Realistic achievable planning and time-tabling are key to success and the Skilled Helper is warm and supportive - helping the client look out and overcome obstacles, turning challenges into opportunities and inspiring the client to mobilise their personal, social and material resources (particularly helpful family members, friends and self-help networks etc). Stage III action skills include:

- Divergent Thinking
- Goal Setting
- Decision Making
- Problem Solving
- Programme Choice
- Evaluate Knowledge of Resources
- Using Knowledge of How Behaviour is Changed
- Using Knowledge of How Useful Behaviour is Maintained
- Teaching skills & Promoting Learning skills

Evaluation

In addition to Explore, Understand & Act skills evaluation of the therapy process is also important. It can take place at the end of each session as a summarization, whenever appropriate. It helps the client understand what ground they have gone over, helps them perceive progress they have made and inspires them with understanding on how they want to move forwards.

*To learn about this approach in detail see Part II, III & 4 of
An Easy Introduction to the Egan's Skilled Helper
Solution Focused Counselling Approach by Patrick JM Nelson.*

Gerard Egan's 'The Skilled Helper' is available from the FETT Bookshop