

Empowering Women: The Essential Role of Counselling Skills in Midwifery Practice

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Abstract

Counselling is the professional advice and guidance given to the person by the trained person in order to assist the client to explore, discover and clarify ways of living more positively, satisfactorily and successfully in the society. Maternal health refers to the health of women during pregnancy, childbirth and the postnatal period. Each stage should be a positive experience, ensuring women and their babies reach their full potential for health and well being. Midwives are playing a very vital role in taking care of the women during her perinatal period.

This article discusses the importance of counselling skills in midwifery practice which helps in delivering high quality, compassionate care to the mother during her perinatal period and also explores the way in which midwives can develop their counselling skills.

Midwife: A midwife is a person who, having been regularly admitted to a midwifery educational programme, duly recognized in the country in which it is located, has successfully completed the prescribed course of studies in midwifery and has acquired the requisite qualifications to be registered and/or legally licensed to practice midwifery. (ICM 2005)

Midwifery: Midwifery is defined as “skilled, knowledgeable and compassionate care for childbearing women, newborn infants and families across the continuum from pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, birth, postpartum and the early weeks of life”. The evidence shows us that midwifery plays a “vital” role, and when provided by educated, trained, regulated, licensed midwives, is associated with improved quality of care and rapid and sustained reductions in maternal and newborn mortality. (WHO)

ICM: International Confederation of Midwives, **CMBC:** College of Midwives of British Columbia, **WHO:** World Health Organisation

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INTRODUCTION

Being able to imagine and feel emotions with in-depth understanding is what makes human beings different from all other creatures on the planet. We react according to the situations and various scenarios have different ways to treat us. Considering a particular situation, our thoughts or

feelings can have an emotional effect on ourselves. Its sad how in the old days, psychological traumas were left unaddressed. It was the invention of new technologies and awareness that taught people to start addressing emotional issues too.

While counselling is widely considered to be a treatment format for people with emotional or mental health concerns, most health providers find themselves offering some kind of counselling along with the services within their particular practice.

What is Counselling

Counselling is a talking therapy that encourages people to address the issue they are facing with an eventual goal to overcome the problem. Counselling allows people to discuss their problems with trained professionals in a peaceful and safe ambiance. The exact meaning of counselling might vary among individuals. But in general, it is the process where the client talk about the issues in detail either intending to overcome the same or to explore your thoughts comprehensively.

Counseling is a process between a client and therapist to explore difficulties, learn to see things clearly, and facilitate positive change (Sexton, 1996). The role of a counselor doesn't limit to suggesting to do this or that. Rather they support to speak about the problems in detail to identify the primary cause behind them. Furthermore, they develop an action plan to help cope up with the issue or win over it.

AIMS OF COUNSELLING

1. To help patients gain an insight into the origins and development of emotional difficulties, leading to an increased capacity to take rational control over feelings and actions.
2. To alter mal adjusted behaviour.
3. To assists clients to move in the direction of fulfilling their potential, or achieve an integration of conflicting elements within themselves.
4. To provide clients with the skills, awareness and knowledge which will enable them to confront social inadequacy.

COUNSELLING IN MIDWIFERY

Pregnancy and childbirth are transformative life

experiences that can create or exacerbate significant emotional, physical, social, and relational challenges. Maternal health refers to the health of women during pregnancy, childbirth and the postnatal period. Each stage should be a positive experience, ensuring women and their babies reach their full potential for health and well-being.

Counselling in midwifery encompasses both informational and emotional needs, and midwives incorporate skills such as active listening, reflecting, and deflecting. They disseminate information in a way that is accessible and comprehensive, and strive to check in with women's experiences, values, and beliefs as they make decisions throughout their care.

Midwives provide high quality antenatal and postnatal care to maximize the women's health during and after pregnancy, detect problems early and manage or refer for any complications. As part of their role in providing comprehensive and holistic maternity care, midwives support women facing significant changes in their bodies, relationships, and to prepare for considerable shifts of identity, responsibility, and family life. Midwives help women to feel confident and knowledgeable, to cope with anxiety and fear.

Some of the situations in which a midwife will be called upon to enter into a counselling conversation may include: the client's concerns about pain management, fear of delivery, a desire to change a habit to enhance their health and the health of the fetus, and so on. It is critical that the midwife have a clear understanding of when they can help the client and when the client should be referred to a mental health professional. Although not an exhaustive list, the following situations require a referral.

Midwife as a Counsellor

In 1986 the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, published the following definition for professional counselling

Counselling is the skilled and principled use of relationship to facilitate self-knowledge, emotional acceptance and growth and the optimal development of personal resources. The overall aim is to provide an opportunity to work towards living more satisfyingly and resourcefully. Counselling relationships will vary according to need but may be concerned with developmental issues, addressing and resolving specific problems, making decisions, coping with crisis, developing personal insights and knowledge, working through feelings of inner

conflict or improving relationships with others. The counsellor's role is to facilitate the clients work in ways that respect the client's values, personal resources and capacity for self-determination.

This definition demonstrates how easily the practice of counselling fits into the practice of midwifery, but there is little or no room for advising clients in the counselling setting. Of course, a midwife will advise the client on the medical aspects of the pregnancy, such as maintaining adequate nutrition or providing lactation support, but they may need to shift the focus to a guidance role when supporting the client to make certain decisions, change concerning behaviours, or to process an emotional concern.

Current models of counselling focus on what is called person centred practice. Interventions are based on each client's goals and draw from each client's internal and external resources, whenever possible. Working from the client's goals increases their sense of worth and accomplishment and reduces the chance of the client resisting change as they find it difficult to fight against something that they have identified as their desired outcome. Assisting a client to access their own resources allows that client to become more self-sufficient and more likely to generalize their self-knowledge and new skills to future.

The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) states that the midwife's role is "to give the necessary support, care, and advice during pregnancy, labour and the postpartum period."

The College of Midwives of British Columbia (CMBC) adds that the full scope of this care includes, "education, counselling advocacy, and emotional support."

COUNSELLING SKILLS IN MIDWIFERY

1. Values & Self-Awareness in the Midwife-Client Relationship

To be an effective communicator and counsellor the midwife must understand their own values and beliefs, and be self-aware of their emotional, physical and mental response to the client. Our values provide guidance for us as individuals; determining what we believe to be right and wrong. Whether we realize it or not, our values inform us in our everyday lives and in the client/counselling and client/midwife relationships. Awareness of personal values and beliefs also allow the counsellors to work in a non-judgemental

way with clients. Increased self-awareness brings out the ability to set and maintain professional and personal boundaries. These boundaries provide emotional safety for both midwives and their clients.

2. Relationship Building

Relationship building will facilitate communication and possible counselling support as the midwife and client work together. This relationship is a professional one, with clear boundaries and expectations, but is still based on warmth and mutual acceptance. The essential elements of a helping relationship are listed below.

A) Positive Regard

To develop and maintain a healthy clinical relationship, it is important that the midwife be able to maintain a positive manner in the company of the client. They need to portray a belief in the client's strengths and abilities. The midwife also needs to be curious about the client's values and beliefs and to acknowledge and accept those beliefs and values as being fundamental to the client's sense of self.

B) Attending

When engaged in a clinical conversation, midwives have a number of tools at hand to demonstrate that they are engaged with what the client is communicating. Those practices include: orientating the body to the client's face, sitting up in a relaxed and alert manner, making regular eye contact, using continuation sounds, such as "hmm," and "yes," and nodding the head. Keeping the hands and body fairly still and not toying with a pen or fidgeting in the chair will also communicate active listening. As a result of using these tools, the client should feel heard and know that they are the focus of the conversation for that period of time.

C) Non-Judgement

It is essential that midwives demonstrate an attitude of non-judgement when meeting with clients. Creating a safe and supportive environment where clients feels comfortable exploring their thoughts, feelings, and experiences without fear of being judged or criticized. It involves listening to clients with an open mind and accepting them as they are, without trying to change them or impose

your own beliefs or values.

D) Genuineness

Genuineness is a fundamental factor in any healthy relationship. It is especially important in a relationship where trust and ongoing communication are critical to ensuring a positive outcome. The midwife can demonstrate genuineness through tone of voice, a warm manner, regular eye contact, and questions that indicate an interest in the client's well-being.

4. Empathy as a Counselling Tool

The cornerstone of counselling is empathy. Merriam-Webster defines empathy as:

1. The imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it.
2. The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; also: the capacity for this.

Why is empathy so important in the helping relationship?

Empathy is typically expressed in counselling sessions using a tool called reflective listening. In a reflective listening interaction, the counsellor/midwife engages, listens carefully to what the client is expressing and verbally reflects back their understanding of what the client is feeling.

The client has the option of agreeing with the midwife or correcting them and restating what they are feeling. In either case, it is a successful interaction. If the midwife correctly identifies the feeling, the client feels heard and understood and will likely be open to further exploration of their concerns.

5. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is an essential counseling skill that involves, taking the client's words and reframing them in a way that accurately reflects their meaning and intent. Effective paraphrasing in counseling requires active listening, empathy, and attention to detail. It involves paying close attention to the client's verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as their tone and emotional state.

When paraphrasing, the counselor should use their own words to restate the client's message, while also conveying the same meaning and emotion. This helps the client feel heard and understood, and encourages them to share more deeply and authentically.

Paraphrasing can be used throughout the counseling process to build rapport, clarify information, and deepen the client's understanding of their own experiences. It can also be used as a tool for exploring the client's emotions and helping them gain insight into their thoughts and behaviors.

Overall, paraphrasing is a powerful counseling skill that can help the client feel seen, heard, and valued, while also facilitating their growth and healing.

In a counselling conversation, paraphrasing the client's statements not parroting back their feelings using their exact words gives the client an opportunity to broaden their understanding of their situation. In hearing your interpretation of their feelings, the client has the opportunity to agree with or refute your reflection.

An Example of Paraphrasing

Notice that the client has now begun to talk about her concerns for the birth and not just her concerns about the younger siblings.

6. Summarizing

Summarizing is an essential skill in counseling that involves reflecting back to the client what they have said in a concise and accurate manner. It shows the client that the counselor is actively listening and trying to understand their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Effective summarizing involves using the client's own words and phrases to reflect back what they have said, without adding any interpretation or judgment. It can also include identifying the main themes or issues that the client has expressed, and highlighting any discrepancies or inconsistencies in their thoughts or feelings.

Summarizing can be used throughout the counseling process to check for understanding, clarify information, and help the client gain insights into their own experiences. It can also be used as a tool for transitioning between different topics or phases of the session.

Overall, summarizing is a powerful counseling skill that can help build rapport, increase empathy,

and facilitate the client's journey towards personal growth and healing.

7. Using Effective Questions

A midwife must learn to use questions sparingly and thoughtfully as a way to assist the client to explore their emotional concerns. It is critical that the midwife learn how to manage the timing, content, and purpose of questions in order to preserve the helping relationship with the client. Closed questions and open questions are generally the most common types of questions. If a client is asked a closed question, they will likely go with the quickest answer, like yes or No, usually starts with Are you?, did she? Open questions are mostly helpful which elicits some information from the patients usually starts with how?, what?. where?, when?

8. Difficult Relationships & Difficult Conversations

There will be times when, despite the midwife's and the client's best efforts at communication, the relationship and/or conversation will be strained.

The first step in dealing with difficult conversations is to ensure that you feel physically and emotionally grounded.

The midwife can use a number of strategies and tools to ensure that the conversation is productive. An important tool is ensuring you understand exactly what it is you want to convey. If there is time, think about the goal of the communication. Write down some of the points that need to be made. Make sure that you have any facts that may be relevant at hand. If you are expecting a very difficult conversation, try to rehearse it in your mind. While breathing in a steady manner, visualize the conversation. Imagine yourself being calm and grounded, saying what you need to say and listening to the other person.

9. Relaying Bad News

There are very specific tools to use when relaying difficult information such as the death of an infant. It is critical that the midwife be mindful of the language used, the tone of voice, body language, and location for the conversation.

When relaying bad news, it is best to choose a location that is as private as possible, where there are chairs to sit on and is big enough to include family and friends if the circumstances warrant.

Ideally, there will be tissues, soft lighting, and the room will be in a quiet place. The midwife should use a calm and soothing voice to relay the information. It is important to state the information clearly and simply while giving plenty of time and emotional space for strong reactions. Initially, there may be expressions of disbelief, rage, blame, tears, or complete silence.

The midwife must stay calm, soothing, and be prepared to answer questions when the client is ready. In most situations, the midwife will just sit and be a witness to the family's grief in the early moments of the meeting until the information is absorbed and initial feelings expressed. After that, there will likely be many questions. It is important to answer questions clearly and simply, as with giving the news initially. If the midwife does not have enough information, they can tell the client that they will get the information as soon as they can and will contact them later.

At this time, it is very helpful if the midwife can provide the client and family with information about community supports and any medical information that might be helpful, particularly in dealing with perinatal loss, such as advice and support for the mother on how to manage lactation.

10. Engaging Partners in the Birth Process

It is important for the midwife to look to the client for direction about who they wish to engage in their pregnancy journey and birth. Typically, the client and intimate partner, family member, or close friend will attend the initial consultation with the midwife. At this time, it is most helpful to discuss what each person's role will be in the process.

The midwife may be asked by the client for advice on who to include in prenatal visits and who could or should attend the birth. This is an excellent opportunity for the midwife to use reflective listening skills and questions to help the client raise awareness about what their needs might be throughout the pregnancy and birth.

CONCLUSION

Research suggests both health and mental health counselling from maternity care providers can positively impact women's perinatal experience.

When caregivers establish relationship with clients, their health education and decision making

support efforts are more effective, and a woman's ability to handle challenging circumstances is enhanced.

- Women report counselling is helpful as they make decisions about clinical issues such as antenatal testing or delivery options.
- Women also report that counselling helps meet their emotional needs.
- In 2013 Fenwick et al demonstrated that women feel better able to cope when emotional health needs are addressed in postpartum care, and in 2014 Toohill et al demonstrated that through counselling midwives can effectively help women overcome fear of childbirth which, if left unaddressed, can lead to increased obstetric interventions and poor mental health.

Effective counseling helps relieve distress, build resilience, improve self-esteem, and ultimately improve lives. The more successful this process is, the easier it is to prove misconceptions wrong and see and accept therapy and counseling in their true light.

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