

The Essentials of Feminist Counseling

With the impact of the women's movement over the past few decades, a new kind of therapy has developed that integrates feminist philosophy into therapeutic practice: Feminist Counseling.

Feminist counseling puts **gender** and **power** at the center of the therapeutic process. It recognizes that in order to understand a client, a counselor must consider the client's social, political and cultural context. Feminist counseling, therefore, uses a gendered analysis to understand a woman's experiences and issues. A feminist counselor may help a client to understand how gender, social injustice and power imbalances between men and women impact her life so that the client can better understand and address her problems. Feminist counseling also stresses the importance of counselors' attitudes, values, and beliefs on the therapy process and outcome. The counselor must maintain an equal relationship with the client at all times. This involves taking steps to reduce any

power imbalances between the counselor and client and emphasizing the client's power to make her own decisions. Feminist counseling always aims to empower the client.

Responsibilities of a Feminist Counselor

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1. **Integrate feminist analysis into all spheres of your work.** This means recognizing how inequality and discrimination affect your client and yourself, and taking steps to address it.
2. **Recognize the client's socioeconomic and political circumstances.** Understand her problem within that context without judging, labeling, or blaming her.
3. **Accept and validate the client's experiences and feelings.**
4. **Always be accountable to the client first.**
5. **Be actively involved in ending oppression,** empowering women and girls, respecting differences, and working toward social justice.
6. **Be aware of your own experience and identity** (e.g., class, sex, race, gender, sexuality, etc.) and how this impacts your life.
7. **Continually self-evaluate** and remedy your own biases and oppressive actions.
8. **Continually learn about other dominant and non-dominant cultural and ethnic experiences.**

Techniques for Strengthening Counseling Skills

It is important for feminist counselors to practice their skills using role plays and case studies. Below is a table to remind you and your colleagues of key counseling techniques. It can be used to strengthen skills in your own practice, guide your observation of and support to colleagues, and help you to offer feedback to other counselors in a structured way.

SKILL	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Welcome	Receiving client and offering greetings.	Warmly greeting the client and showing the client where to sit. "What can I do for you today?"
S	Sitting at a comfortable angle and distance. Avoid having a desk between you and the client.	Proximity is not too far yet not too close.
O	Using an open posture.	Sitting in a welcoming position, avoiding crossing arms or looking cross.
L	Leaning forward from time to time.	Body language shows genuine interest.
E	Making effective eye contact.	Counselor looks at the client but does not stare or glare.
R	Remaining relatively relaxed.	Counselor does not look alarmed, shocked, or restless.
Responding/ Attending	Using nonverbal cues and minimum encouragers.	Saying "hmmm", nodding.
Listening	Focusing attentively on what the client is communicating. Processing the meaning of what the client says, rather than just hearing the words.	Avoiding internal distractions while listening to the client. Paying attention to what is said and what is not said.
Probing	Asking questions to elicit more information.	"Could you elaborate more about what you have just told me?"
Questioning	Avoiding interrogation. Asking open-ended rather than closed-ended questions.	"How would you describe the feelings you get that make you want to harm yourself?"
REFLECTIVE SKILLS:		
Paraphrasing	Facilitating the client's personal exploration by demonstrating an understanding of the feelings that the client presents. Repeat what the client has said in your own words but not losing the meaning to show the client that you understand how s/he feels.	"Did I hear you well that...?" "If I understand you correctly..."
Parroting	Repeating exactly what the client has said in order to seek clarity and reflect feelings.	Client says "I feel A, B, C..." and counselor repeats "You feel 'A, B, C...'"
FOCUSING:		
Contrasting	Helping a client become aware of the difference between two conditions or events.	"If you think about A and you compare it with B, what would things be like then?"
Foreground	Bringing one issue to the foreground (i.e., highlighting one aspect) to help give one part of the problem shape and form. This can help the client more readily address one aspect of the problem and work with it.	"From what we have identified, it seems to me that the most urgent issue is A...can we start with that?"
Choice Point	Helping a client to choose one issue she would like to focus on amongst several she has described.	"From what you have been saying it looks like these are the major issues (list them). Which do you feel most comfortable to work with first?"
ADDITIONAL TECHNIQUES:		
Concreteness	Helping the client to be specific, not to be vague nor to generalize.	"When you say he upsets you, what exactly happens?"
Summarizing	Bringing together all that has been talked about during part or all of the counseling session. It involves linking together reported experiences, events, reactions, feelings and ideas.	"Perhaps we can take a look at what we have spoken about so far?"

What will **YOU** do to improve your feminist counseling skills?

Here are some ideas:

- ☉ **Engage in weekly practice sessions with colleagues.** Focus on 1-2 skills per week and write down specific examples of how to improve each.
- ☉ **Think about how you interact with clients.** Do you engage with them as equals? Do your interactions create any power imbalances between you? Commit to at least one action today which will help you to build more equal relationships with your clients.
- ☉ **Speak out in your own community about social injustice.** Remember, your environment and experiences shape your counseling and its results.
- ☉ **Help clients to recognize their own power** to make decisions and change their lives.
- ☉ **Keep a journal of ideas for improving your feminist counseling skills.** Write down reflections each month on how well you have integrated these changes into your practice.
- ☉ **Hold regular meetings with colleagues** (weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly) to discuss challenges you are facing in your feminist counseling and propose ideas to address them.
- ☉ **Continue to learn more about feminist counseling** by reading, reaching out to others in the field, or discussing with colleagues.



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