Chapter 4
Identifying anxieties

The *raison d'être* of this book is to identify and help work with common worries and concerns that are specific to working with our client group. I have focused on the ten main issues that were raised recently by members of the **BACP: U&C** in response to an email requesting them to identify any difficulties they encountered regularly. Clearly, it is not possible to cover all areas of concern here and I should emphasise that I have not placed these in any particular order. Once we have identified the anxieties here, we will be considering possible strategies for working with these issues in the following chapter.

1. Financial constraints on counselling services

We are seeing major restructuring within the education sector; an ongoing process as funding is reduced or reallocated and departments are expected to account for their expenditure and budget management. This will and has resulted in counselling services having to look inwards at their costings and the services that they are able to offer. Primary costs involve the number of paid counsellors a service employs and whether they are full- or part-time. Many services are supplementing their provision with offering trainee placements and opportunities for volunteer counsellors working towards their accreditation. Although these are reasonable and indeed necessary within a profession (imagine if medical students, teachers or indeed hairdressers had no opportunity to practise before qualifying), they do raise discussions surrounding the safety, support, mentoring and competency of a service.

In addition to staffing, there are environmental costs such as premises, furniture, computers and stationery, marketing and publicity costs and professional costs such as supervision and continuing professional

development (**CPD**). Core funding might be provided by an institution's internal budgeting but it is becoming more common that funding is being sought from external sources, for example; from Additional Learning Support (**ALS**) budgets. This ties in with the dilemmas surrounding the passing on of information discussed in *4. Relationship between counselling and academic outcomes* below. Generally, when it comes to funding, the manager of the counselling service is bombarded from several different directions.

2. Working with hard-to-reach students

Who are we referring to here? Who are 'hard-to-reach students'? Possibly due to the vocational associations within Further Education (**FE**), traditionally colleges are often assumed to attract students with a less focused approach to education and studying than universities. However, with widening participation agendas, social inclusion policies and articulation agreements, universities are also recognising that their student population may not be drawn solely from the traditional social and academic circles that they once were. Students from non-academic backgrounds may have different aspirations, learning styles and support mechanisms than students from more expected backgrounds. The upbringing, socialisation and home life of a student on their own by no means defines our 'hard-to-reach' population. There are many reasons or barriers for students who may well benefit from counselling to present as a did not attend (**DNA**):

● Students may view attending counselling as admitting they are not able to cope
● Their ongoing issues may prevent them from attending regularly
● They may not be able to afford any additional travel/childcare costs to attend
● Any chaos in their lives may overtake the need to attend the session
● Work commitments can reduce time available to attend
● A counselling session can become yet another appointment to add to mounting pressures
● Peer pressure may prevent them from engaging with support
● A mental illness may make it difficult to cope with attending regular sessions
● They may simply forget.

Figure 4.1 Working with hard-to-reach students

For me, the core of the issue lies with whether we accept **DNA**s as an indicator of an underlying issue or rather whether we view them as a sign of failure. What we as counsellors need to do, is reflect on our practice to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our increasingly diverse student populations.

3. Counselling staff and students

Many counselling departments offer counselling for both students and staff. This can raise several difficulties in our practice, for example:

- Environment – students and staff sharing a space in a combined service. Both client groups may feel distinctly uncomfortable with the possibility of meeting someone they know when they attend their counselling sessions.
- Counsellors – potential overlapping of boundaries if working with both client groups. A situation may occur whereby a student client discusses a member of staff they are experiencing difficulties with which compromises the counsellor who may also be working with that same individual, or vice versa.
- Funding – different funding streams. Separating financial sources for students and staff can cause complications. An example of this would be providing two separate sets of end of year statistics.

● Management – split responsibilities of outcomes between academic (students) and occupational health (staff). Managing two parallel teams of counsellors who may be working in two separate environments is not easy. Employing one manager for each service can be costly and be perceived as duplication.

This is by no means a comprehensive list but highlights some of the core questions that must be asked prior to setting up or evaluating a counselling service that caters for both students and staff.

4. Relationship between counselling and academic outcomes

Which is our greatest aim; students' emotional or psychological wellbeing, or our clients' retention and success on their course? Do we measure our success with a therapeutic outcome measure such as **CORE-OM**, or do we measure the outcome using course attendance and results? The difficulty with this question is that whilst the counselling service might answer without hesitation that the students' wellbeing is central to our practice, university and college managers may be far more focused on the latter. This can lead to tensions in the relationship between the service and management of an academic institution.

In addition to this is the challenge of the collation and dissemination of the data itself. We have strict requirements surrounding confidentiality and yet a growing number of services are being requested to provide information regarding their clients to satisfy funding bodies or to justify their existence in the eyes of management. Here we can find ourselves stuck in the situation of being asked for information that compromises our professional or ethical position whilst being instructed that if we do not provide it, then it could be perceived that we are creating barriers, not working transparently or preventing a student from accessing financial support. This can be incredibly stressful, especially for lone workers or when the request is worded in such a way that it appears to be mandatory.

5. Threat of outsourcing

The reoccurring theme of saving money by providing services more cheaply is ongoing. As counsellors we constantly have to justify expenditure, which can be disheartening and exhausting. The

prevalence and cost of an Employee Assistance Programme (**EAP**) is attractive for budget holders who may wish to keep a tight reign over staff support services and occupational health. The possibility that a service may be disbanded and provision relocated to an external agency can be a very real threat to some services. Counsellors can find themselves in a situation where they have to justify their practice, provide evidence for their outcomes and reduce their costs above and beyond the usual professionalism of a service. This is an area that resonates with Jane, the FE counsellor, when she considers the impact that such a situation and the insensitivities of the organisation may have on counselling practice:

Voices

Jane

'Containment – the issue of who contains the container? When a lone worker is holding the distress of an organisation, what support [do] they receive? How little do organisations understand, for example, safeguarding emergencies in a wider context of cuts? When we are not certain of our own security in our jobs, how can we offer a secure base to frightened clients?'

We can see from this reflection that the impact of such a process can be far-reaching and the mindset of the staff undergoing this process is key to the atmosphere within the service during this time. The fear of change, of stepping out of our comfort zone, can be accompanied by a sense of lack of control and disempowerment; issues that we work with on a daily basis with clients.

6. Cultural issues

There has been a significant increase in international students enrolling on courses within the UK. This is due to a variety of reasons but two main ones are (1) the reputation and value that British qualifications have gained abroad, attracting an increase in international students, and (2) individuals seeking asylum in the UK but not being allowed to work for the duration of the process. Both of these groups can present with issues as a result of their particular situation; the pressure of succeeding when

their families have invested so much in their future, or the incredible stresses that surround personal loss when seeking asylum. These are just two examples of how our client group is changing and why we may see an increase in clients from different cultures seeking counselling.

Understanding of the counselling process differs from culture to culture. Many societies do not have a tradition of counselling; talking about difficulties is seen as selfish or a weakness. In many cultures, such matters are more appropriate for discussion with a spiritual leader. If an individual is struggling with an aspect of their life, it can be a source of shame for the family. Many cultures see 'problems' as being shared within a community rather than the personal matter we might see it in our culture.

So we can see that our clients might be approaching counselling with a different expectation, maybe expecting advice or guidance as they would receive from a religious guide, possibly feeling shameful or uncertain about attending in addition to their underpinning issues. We need to ensure that we have prepared ourselves appropriately using supervision, **CPD**, an awareness of other cultures and self-reflection to avoid doing harm.

7. New developments

Up to now we have considered many areas of cutbacks in counselling services. We have acknowledged the financial pressures that managers are facing so here we will focus on how this can impact on our counselling and measures that we might be asked to implement to reduce costs. It is well recognised that one-to-one counselling is the most costly approach to providing support but this is the method we have been trained in, so sits within our comfort zone. Being asked to develop new methods of therapeutic working with clients can be very challenging indeed. Firstly, we must dispel the idea that this might be as a result of us not doing a good job of individual counselling; in education settings, this is unlikely to be the driver behind the suggestion of new approaches. Additional methodologies are about expanding our provision, supporting more students without increasing our costs. The introduction of online counselling, telephone sessions or group work is currently on the agenda of many counselling services. Of course, as with any new innovations such developments come with their own challenges, in this case technologically, legally and ethically. We may hold a fear that our interventions will in some way be diluted, that this is not how we were

trained to work or that we don't feel confident enough with alternative methods to trust the therapeutic benefit to our clients. We may also need to be convinced of the efficacy and require evidence of the advantages to new ways of working to warrant the investment of time involved to change.

8. Risk of harm

When we talk of risk of harm, what do we mean by harm, and harm to whom? Rather than only focusing on the client, we should not forget ourselves and our capacity to put our clients' needs before our own. Many anxieties we may have around harm may be in relation to our client, but we are working in an environment where we can also cause harm to ourselves.

Firstly, in relation to our client we may harbour concerns regarding issues such as suicide, risky behaviours, self-harm, neglect, addiction and stress. These are all valid fears and we would not be reflective, professional counsellors if we were not aware of the dangers surrounding these concerns. Indeed, as Reeves points out:

'The counsellor in an education setting might be seen as having the specialist knowledge and skills to respond to a client who is self-harming. Often counsellors have more experience than other professionals found in such settings, such as teachers, lecturers or other academic support staff, and will be turned to in response to a crisis (it is not untypical for the disclosure of self-harm to be viewed as a crisis by the person who has been disclosed to).'

Reeves (2013)

This expectation places additional responsibility on the counsellor. The weight of this presumption is stressful enough. How we engage with a client who has trusted us enough to share their situation with us can be the difference between life and death. Recognising that harm can be unintentional as well as intentional is a good start to formulating a way of working with suffering, hurt and pain.

Interestingly, when we look inwardly at our own risk from harm we may touch on issues such as 'burn-out', self-harm through over-work, stress, working on the very edge of our abilities and fears surrounding isolated

working. On the surface these may appear to be unintentional side-effects of working as a counsellor but they are no less dangerous than the potential situations involving harm a client can present with. We are just more likely to accept them as part and parcel of the job. Our reaction to our own situation may be very different to how we might respond if a client divulged similar situations and feelings.

In both cases, with regard to clients and to ourselves, we need to develop a very clear strategy for working with risk of harm.

9. Time constraints and waiting lists

The increasing pressure that counselling services find themselves under is an ongoing and almost universal challenge. Here we can hear the experiences of three counsellors and the effect that juggling restricted availability, **DNA**s and the impact that holidays can have on counselling relationships. First, Heidi, a postgraduate diploma student placement:

Voices

Heidi

'I have offered voluntary counselling at two different colleges and there has always been a high level of last-minute cancellations and DNAs. It was therefore a challenge for me to get the prescribed hours required for my counselling diploma and I needed to take on an extra placement. I often drove a long way to be in the colleges, yet sometimes this was a wasted journey. Also some students were being sent by their tutors and had no real desire to be entering into counselling. I believe they contributed towards the high levels of DNAs. Another challenge at one of the colleges I worked at was in regard to a very vulnerable client who, because of his mental health problems, was asked to leave his course. Our relationship was thus severed without warning, leaving me with grave concerns as to the welfare of my client, he was no longer registered on the course and therefore his counselling could not continue. This occurred during a very crucial stage of counselling.'

We can see here that Heidi felt the pressure of making the effort to attend counselling sessions that clients did not always appreciate, the challenge of trying to engage with clients who did not want to be there at all and finally, of how the status of a student can determine their level of support. If a student leaves, their support ends. She had to achieve a set number of counselling hours to pass her course which placed her under pressure from the start. She experienced sessions being 'wasted' on clients who were referred against their wishes and the opposite, where counselling was withdrawn for a client who was very much in need.

Elaine, a volunteer counsellor working towards her accreditation, identified far more with the challenge of having a restricted number of sessions determined by the organisation and the effect this can have on working with an anxious client:

Voices

Elaine

'With a great proportion of students being mature with ages ranging from 18 to 50 years old, a mature student returns to the education system with fixed conditions of worth. They are often propelled back in time to childhood, anxiety and peer pressure with little or no self-confidence. This is where counselling comes into its own, providing a safe place to discuss these issues and anxieties, and actually have a full-scale battle with anxiety; anxiety thrives in a college student and it loves to see them fail. On the other hand I, as a counsellor, love to get in amongst it with a client, to challenge their anxieties, to encourage self-awareness and growth in their abilities. To enable them to see themselves, their true selves, the individual that has a longing to learn and grow. I can stay with my client's process supporting them while their confidence grows. Although at college we only have a six-week initial contract with the client, we are lucky enough to have a robust enough supply of counsellors to extend this contract, at the counsellors' own discretion. I have made use of this many times especially in cases of anxiety and depression, where the client needs continued support often to the end of the course.'

However, Jane, a counsellor working within a FE college, identified a different source of challenge; she has experienced 'so many breaks to working – every six weeks there's a vacation (abandonment)', which is a situation common to the majority of education providers.

To summarise, the experiences of just three counsellors has identified the following challenges:

- DNAs (did not attend)
- Counselling only being available when students are actively enrolled on a course
- Meeting the hours required for trainee counsellors
- Students being referred against their wishes
- Restricting the number of sessions available
- Holidays disrupting the therapeutic flow of the counselling relationship.

10. Helplessness with regard to practical issues

Working with students can result in a range of issues presenting themselves. Often we can find ourselves in a place where our client is overwhelmed by their circumstances such as with debt, housing, childcare, travel expenses or their safety. Here we hear from Jane again and areas that she has come across in relation to a client's practical dilemmas:

- Lone working
- Being used as a crisis intervention service
- A pervading sense of hopelessness amongst adult learners following basic skills courses who worry that they are unemployable
- The current situation from a welfare perspective – cuts in benefits making family life extraordinarily strained
- Students finding it hard to hold on to hope for the future
- The impossibility of therapeutic work for individuals who are overwhelmed by anxiety caused by their situation.

To illustrate this, Jane provides an example of a situation with a client, Tanya, whose needs straddled the practical and the psychological. She was placed in a position where she had to prioritise the client's immediate needs before moving on to her additional issues.

Voices

Jane

'Tanya was referred to the College Counselling Service having broken down in tears in the classroom. Her teacher had been concerned about her for some time as she was a very committed student but often looked tired and distracted and her self-care had noticeably deteriorated over a period of months. She presented to the Service and told me that she could no longer cope with the stress that she was under. She was a mature student with four children of her own and was looking after two of her sister's children while her sister was unable to care for them. She was studying a vocational course that she hoped would lead to future employment. Alongside studying and caring for six children, she worked a few hours in a fast food restaurant and her partner worked part-time in a supermarket. They are both on a low income but managed to make ends meet – just about – until the changes to Working Tax Credit in April 2012. As the combined working hours for the couple was under 24 hours and neither worked as much as 16 hours they lost their Working Tax Credit. Both asked their employers for more hours but were not given enough. Losing the tax credit was catastrophic and the family was pushed deeply into poverty. Tanya had studied for a year and a half and did not want to drop out of her course when she only had six months more to do to achieve the qualification that would make her more employable. She found that she was not able to stretch the money far enough to feed the children all week and was hugely distressed having to put the children to bed while they were crying because they were hungry. She took them to school without packed lunches when she could no longer afford to give them food and would drop them on the street corner and run, being too ashamed to face the school when they would ask why the children did not have food. The situation came to a head when she was called into the school because her eleven-year-old son had been caught stealing a mobile phone. The school's policy was to call the police and she attended while they reprimanded him. She was utterly ashamed and devastated, but felt even worse when she walked him home and he cried saying that he had done it so that he could sell the phone and give her the money to

*buy food. Her relationship with her partner had been under
tremendous strain because of the financial difficulties and she
was very concerned that they would separate. She was not
sure that she would be able to cope alone. She said that she
felt like taking all the children to Social Services and leaving
them there as she felt that she was empty and not able to give
them anything.*

*'The challenges that I faced in dealing with this client were
numerous. There was a very real welfare need so I referred her
to our Welfare Advisor (one of the benefits of working in a multi-
disciplinary team) who was able to refer her to a food bank.
This was of immediate but not substantial ongoing support.
I felt that it did something to help me to manage the anxiety
that overwhelmed me as I heard her story. The desperation was
palpable as was how precarious everything in her life felt: the
survival of her family and her capacity to parent. The possibility
of her managing her situation sufficiently to be able to engage
in her studies seemed beyond hope. However, she considered
the College to be her lifeline. She was not able to talk or cry
with anyone else and the small window that the service gave her
helped her to contain her anxiety. She spoke about the course
as being the opportunity that she had waited for all her life
and she clung on to it knowing that it represented a way out of
her situation. She was continually in trouble on the course for
handing assignments in late and not having the right equipment.
She did not want the teaching staff to know about her situation
so I respected her wishes and it remained confidential.'*

From this vignette, we can see that Jane felt very conscious of the physi-
cal needs of Tanya and overwhelmed by her story. She recognised Tanya's
motivations and her very real difficulties with regard to money and food.
She also recognised the need for confidentiality and privacy. We can see
that for Tanya her learning experience is seriously affected by her current
home life; her financial situation, her role as a mother, her relationship,
her shame and her feelings of not being able to cope. In this situation,
attending counselling resulted in practical and emotional support. The
counsellor was able to access immediate help from within her team to
temporarily address an immediate issue. The client had a safe place to
discuss her situation. This is a good example of clients that we may en-
counter and the range of challenges we face in balancing meeting their
needs and also feeling that, professionally, we have done all that we can.

> ## Points to consider
> - Do you focus on the wellbeing of your client or their success on their course, or have you found a balance of both?
> - How do you respond to DNAs? Do you see the client who does not attend as a problem or as an indicator that there is a problem?

Further reading

BACP: U&C Special Interest Group (2008) 'Services Under Threat: A BACP: U&C Discussion Document'. *BACP: U&C Journal*. Lutterworth: BACP.

Balestra (2012) 'Challenges in Working with Hard-to-Reach Students in Further Education'. *AUCC Journal*. Lutterworth: BACP.

Bell, E. (1996) *Counselling in Further and Higher Education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Benson, N. (2007) 'Staff Counselling at the Interface: Working Creatively and Flexibly with the Organisation'. *AUCC Journal*. Lutterworth: BACP.

Coate, M. (2010) 'Guidance of Trainee Placements'. *T3 Information Sheet*. Lutterworth: BACP.

Hodgson, A. (2009) 'Auditing a Small Counselling Service'. *AUCC Journal*. Lutterworth: BACP.

Hodgson, A. (2008) 'Challenges for Staff'. *AUCC Journal*. Lutterworth: BACP.

Hodgson, A. (2005) 'Setting up a Staff Counselling Service'. *AUCC Journal*. Rugby: BACP.

Lawton, B., Bradley, A., Collins, J., Holt, C. & Kelly, F. (2010) *AUCC Guidelines for University and College Counselling Services* (2nd edn). Lutterworth: BACP.

Noonan, E. (1983) *Counselling Young People*. London: Routledge.

Reference

Reeves, A. (2013) *Challenges in Counselling: Self-harm*. London: Hodder Education.