

SECOND EDITION

# The Heart of Counseling

*Counseling Skills Through Therapeutic Relationships*



Jeff L. Cochran and Nancy H. Cochran



# THE HEART OF COUNSELING

More than any other text on the market, *The Heart of Counseling* is effective in helping students to understand the importance of therapeutic relationships and to develop the qualities that make the therapeutic relationships they build with clients the foundation of healing. In these pages, students come to see how all skills arise from, and are directly related to, the counselor's development and to building therapeutic relationships. Student learning ranges from therapeutic listening and empathy to structuring sessions, from explaining counseling to clients and caregivers to providing wrap-around services, and ultimately to experiencing therapeutic relationships as the foundation of professional and personal growth.

*The Heart of Counseling* includes:

- case studies and discussions applying skills in school and agency settings;
- specific guidance on how to translate the abstract concepts of therapeutic relationships into concrete skill sets;
- exploration of counseling theories and tasks within, and extending from, core counseling skills;
- videos that bring each chapter to life;
- test banks, instructor's manuals, syllabi, and guidance for learning-outcomes assessments for professors.

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Counseling Skills Through  
Therapeutic Relationships

*2nd edition*

*Jeff L. Cochran and  
Nancy H. Cochran*

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The first edition of *The Heart of Counseling* was dedicated to “the many students that we have come to know through deep sharing of feelings and ideas.” That dedication remains for this 2nd edition, with the addition of the many counseling students that we continue to learn with, plus the clients who continue to teach and inspire us to share our learning of healing and growth through therapeutic relationships.

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# PREFACE

As counselor educators and supervisors, as well as counselors ourselves, we have written and now revise *The Heart of Counseling* to solve a series of related problems that we see as hurtful to the effectiveness of the helping professions for persons in need. We know from the literature of counselor development (Falender & Shafranske, 2004; Ronnestad & Skovolt, 2003; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998), as well as our experience, that it is natural for beginning counselors to yearn for quick fixes for client problems. It makes sense that many of us came into the helping profession to be active helpers, and therefore are eager to apply various counseling techniques. Confounding the situation is the contrast between beginning counselors' need for concrete skills versus the fact that counseling concepts, especially those of therapeutic relationships, are highly abstract. One result is that beginning counselors are often tempted to dive straight into counseling techniques aimed at forcing immediate behavior change without developing a therapeutic relationship to ensure that clients own the changes they make.

We know from experience and the growing body of supportive literature (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999; Norcross, 2002, 2011) that the therapeutic relationship a counselor forms with each client can be the most powerful tool for helping clients change. So one of our goals is to help readers see that “slow is fast”—to see the value of the therapeutic relationships they can develop. We frame all counseling skills through therapeutic relationships: from active listening and reflection to treatment planning, and explaining counseling to clients, parents, teachers and administrators; from deep empathy to structuring sessions such that change will happen; from unconditional positive regard for clients to helping clients manage crises; from genuineness with clients to reaching across cultures and beyond. We provide readers with extensive setting-based examples of counseling skills through therapeutic relationships in action. We help readers to be active learners, to see themselves in therapeutic relationships in their settings, and to develop themselves for the therapeutic relationships they will form. We help readers see how counseling skills through therapeutic relationships form a foundation for all that counselors do, including: integrating techniques from theories of psychotherapy aimed at immediate client change, skill-teaching and guidance; assessment and diagnosis; hallway moments with clients in schools and other interactions

beyond individual sessions; career-focused counseling, group and family work; and all the wrap-around services and skills of a professional counselor.

We aim for the practical goal of making the hard-to-define concepts of therapeutic relationships into concrete skill sets, which we find to be especially important to meet early-stage learners where they naturally are in their development. We write from a conceptual approach for learners that benefit most from “getting a feel” for effective work. And we break elusive concepts down into highly specific guidance for learners that benefit more from step-by-step specificity.

We encourage readers to be active learners with primary skill objectives stated on the first page of each chapter, field- and learner-based focus activities to open each chapter, extensive setting-based examples to help readers see themselves in each skill, common problems in application sections to conclude chapters, and activities and resources for further learning within each chapter. But along with active learning, we focus on counselor development to be the best tool possible for each client served. We see a part of the urge in beginning counselors for quick fixes as stemming from a lack of therapeutic confidence in self. Carl Rogers (1980) wrote that even late in his career, before beginning with a new client, he often had to remind himself that he, as a person, could be enough in a facilitative relationship. But how can a beginning counselor know this when she has not experienced it yet? We see this understandable lack of confidence as part of what drives beginning counselors to hurry for the quick fix technique. We often see the errant thought as, “Surely a relationship with *me* could not be facilitative.” So, we strive to help students see therapeutic relationships in action, to visualize themselves as effective counselors, and most importantly, to engage in the self-reflection and self-development necessary to become the best tool possible for therapeutic relationships with clients.

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We would like to thank Rose Gamble, who assisted especially in the final months of revisions in identifying new and interesting literature related to key aspects of *Heart* and for her conversations of the role of therapeutic relationships in her practice and issues from her experience teaching counseling skills course sections. We would like to thank Bre Banks, Dareen Basma and Emma Burgin for their input, including syllabus revisions for our revised Counseling Skills class and other input. And we would like to acknowledge Tiffany Brooks for her support and input, and for co-authoring the [Chapter 15](#) section, “Career Counseling and Therapeutic Relationships—Balancing the Personal and the Informational.”

We thank our many students and readers in close contact at all levels in their education and development, who have guided us with their thinking in reaction to *Heart*. We very much appreciate their part in making our work better. And we thank family friends Margaret Cubine and Luther Mundy, elders who dedicated their lives to mental health and human development, and who read the 1st edition, offering their input and support.

As always, we acknowledge our parents, who have worked so hard to give us the very best chance possible to learn and love, and who encouraged us to take risks in order to contribute our part as teachers and helpers. We state our great appreciation to Louis and Joyce Cochran, and Richard and Janice Haldeman, who sacrificed so much for us; and especially to Richard Haldeman for his thorough reading, input and support of the 1st edition.

And we acknowledge and thank our son, Erzhan Cochran (age 11 at the time of writing), for his contributions to our “family business” in teaching, research, and service in the counseling field. Especially lately he has joined us for numerous conferences and meetings that were appropriate for him to attend. He gives us the time to push the work forward, when one of us must be away for that. And most of all, he continues to build a strong and positive attitude, helping us daily to find joy in the present moment and in the work of helping others.

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# INTRODUCTION

*It is only with the heart that we can see,  
what is essential is invisible to the eye.*

Antoine De Saint-Exupery

*There is an organ in the body that, if it is righteous,  
ensures that the whole system will be righteous . . .  
This organ is the heart.*

Muhammad

## **Why the “Heart” of Counseling?**

The word *heart* in the title of this book is used to convey two main meanings: core and emotion. The word *heart* implies a central core, as in the saying, “Get right to the heart of the matter.” Think, for a moment, of the implications of this saying for the counseling profession. We counselors are often trying to figure out how to be more efficient—to “get to the heart of the matter”—while also maintaining respect and caring for each client’s individuality. The client’s own pace and path to the “heart of the matter” can be easily overlooked in difficult moments for counselor and client. Thus, the skills we guide you through in this text are presented as the core, or “the heart,” of what counselors do: a home base to return to when adrift, or as the strong foundation on which to build your career and all that you do as a counselor. These are the counseling skills that build courage and confidence. All other counselor tasks spring from and revolve around them.

The word *heart* also implies an active investment of emotional energy, as when referring to an athlete who competes with great passion one might say, “She plays the game with heart.” Counseling can never lack investment of the counselor’s emotion and energy. While you, as counselor, may become relaxed and more at ease in the work, you must continue to feel and respond to your clients’ emotion with active compassion. The best and most efficient counseling is “heartfelt.” Responding fully to emotion, both your client’s and your own, is a theme woven throughout this text. Experiencing your clients’ emotions with them, while remaining aware of your own as counselor, is the

golden road to developing deep caring and making healing connections. Such connections are challenging and profoundly powerful in our development as counselors.

### **A Few Notes about Us**

Jeff is primarily a counselor educator, a professor at this time. He has worked as a counselor for students at an elementary school, a middle school and at universities. He has provided counseling and related mental health services at outdoor camps, at residential treatment facilities and at high schools. Jeff has completed these works in several areas of the United States and overseas. He currently has the honor of supervising and consulting with counselors and mental health service providers across a great many settings. He continues to learn from these counselors and students.

Nancy has education, expertise and experience with a wide range of ages and persons as a school psychologist, as well as a counselor. Her primary work at this time is as the Clinical Director of the UT REACH Project, through which she and Jeff serve at-risk children and families with child-centered play therapy (CCPT; Cochran, Nordling, & Cochran, 2010), as well as supervising and training post-masters clinicians in CCPT. She has served as a counselor in private practice, as well as school and agency settings. She is certified through the National Institute for Relationship Enhancement in CCPT and CCPT-Supervision.

We have been married for 24 years. In that time we have had the opportunity to write, research, present, teach, work, play and parent together. Themes of our combined written works have focused on the importance and power of therapeutic relationships. We have enjoyed working together with children in schools and agencies, as foster parents, and as camp counselors. We have also enjoyed working together with graduate students in the classroom, and on various projects and research. In this work, we have experienced the power of building effective, fulfilling human relationships with students, serving as their teachers, advisers and supporters. The joy we find together in this work has helped to maintain and improve our own multifaceted relationship. We share our ideas and philosophical musings about life, and the challenges of counseling and the other helping professions quite a bit. Our ideas and beliefs are often complementary, or so similar that we don't know whose idea was whose, or if indeed the beliefs and ideas we have are spontaneously created between us!

By far our most important work together is in loving and parenting our wonderful son, Erzhan. Our family came together through his adoption during the writing of the first edition of *Heart*. This is challenging and joyous work indeed!

## Theoretical Base and Background

The counseling theories that have been most influential in our education and our work have been the person-centered approach (Casemore, 2006; Cornelius-White, Motschnig-Pitric, & Lux, 2013; Rogers, 1961) and the cognitive approaches to counseling (Beck & Beck, 2011; Ellis & Dryden, 2007). Some of the influence that this background has on our text will be evident. We often emphasize persons' self-talk in examples and present counseling as an experience through which persons learn and grow, and through which self-talk and self-perception changes. We emphasize that the therapeutic relationship is the key factor in promoting meaningful change and growth for the individual client. These foci do not exclude any counseling theory, but are the result of our experience and study as counselors. Regarding theory, we strongly agree with the following quote from Carl Rogers: "There is one *best* school of therapy. It is the school of therapy you develop for yourself based on a continuing critical examination of the effect of your way of being in the relationship" (1987, p. 185).

## Important Notes on Case Examples

We provide a great many case examples to illustrate the skills and concepts of counseling. Some case examples were based on clients of ours, some were based on clients of our students, and some examples are hypothetical or composite examples based on combinations of experiences with clients in similar situations. When case examples are based on persons served by one of us, we sometimes tell the example using "I" to refer to the counselor, which allows us to convey more personally how we were affected in interchanges. When the case examples are based on persons served by one of our students, or when they are hypothetical, composite examples, we present the example and refer to the helper as "the counselor" or create a name for the counselor. All case examples are presented without identifying information or with the information altered to protect privacy. Still, we would like to convey that each of these case examples may contain elements of stories from people who continue to remain special to us. We remember them well, and continue to care about them, respect them, and wish the best for them. Many of the stories, while changed from any specific person's situation, would not be possible without the deep sharing that happened between counselor and client.

Additionally, we occasionally use examples of children to help explain something important. Sometimes a child example is simplest and best. However, this book is mostly about counseling adults and adolescents. The same concepts are true in counseling children, but applications are different. Children's primary mode of communication, especially communication of the depth for counseling, is play, not talk.



## Note of References to Clients and Gender

When referring to clients throughout *Heart*, we often refer to the client as an individual, because each client is a special person to us, as opposed to the generic “the client” or “clients.” We often refer to the individual client as “your client” because we want you to see yourself in the role of the counselor when reading and because we know that each client will be special to you. And because of referring to the client as an individual, we usually assign the person being referred to a gender, so that we can refer to the person as she or he, rather than excessive use of he/she, him/her.

## How to Use This Book

We challenge you to spend time *contemplating* the concepts presented. In most chapters, we suggest a few modes of contemplation, social and introspective. Idea exchange with others is often very helpful to learning. Thus we give you suggestions for how to implement social contemplation of the concepts and skills we present. Because such group learning is not always possible and because introspective contemplation brings its own values, we also suggest methods of introspective contemplation, sometimes borrowing from mindful meditation and creative arts. We hope you will try many and expand into the further contemplation methods that occur to you for your unique ways of learning.

We encourage you to actively study. Focus yourself on the subject at hand in each chapter with the Primary Skill Objectives and especially the Focus Activity for each chapter. Stop and contemplate each section, rather than just letting your eyes rush over words. Take time to contemplate the big ideas of each chapter, especially those that have struck you most from that chapter. Complete as many of the Activities for Further Study at the end of each chapter as possible, carefully choosing the ones you most need to focus on in your development.

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### Pre-Chapter Quotes

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# 1 TWELVE CONCEPTS

## Roots that Ground and Grow with the Heart of Counseling

*All wisdom is already within us; all love is already within us, all joy. Yet, they are hidden within us until the heart opens.*

Fadiman and Frager

### Primary Skill Objectives

- Begin to understand and be able to explain foundational concepts for counseling skills through therapeutic relationships in your own words.
- Explain how these concepts fit with your core beliefs and how your core beliefs may develop as you develop as a counselor.

### Focus Activity 1

Take time to consider, journal and/or discuss your beliefs about human nature as it relates to counseling. Consider the following questions: What generates behavior, shapes personalities, or creates well-being and mental health? What motivates change? What prevents it? Based on these beliefs, what do you imagine that you may do as a counselor to facilitate positive change and growth in others?

### Focus Activity 2

Consider, journal and discuss ways that you are not the same as you were earlier in life. Think beyond aging and external context changes to core changes within you, such as outlook, predominant feelings, and values. Speculate what helped you change. Keep an open mind to the range of possibilities.

## Introduction

Counseling is evidenced as highly beneficial. Lambert (2013) provided a seminal review of scores of studies—with most of the studies being meta-analyses (statistical analyses of separate studies combined)—concluding far-reaching effects in life-functioning, with clients achieving healthy adjustment for long-lasting periods. In discussing why counseling and psychotherapy work, Lambert, following from a long line of analyses (Bergin & Lambert, 1978; Luborsky, Singer, & Luborsky, 1975; Wampold, 2001; Wampold et al., 1997) pointed out that there is “little or no substantial difference between therapies with regard to client outcome” (Lambert, 2013, p. 194). Rather than particular techniques, the far greater predictors of positives outcome are therapeutic relationships, or counselor qualities in therapeutic relationships that capitalize on clients’ internal strengths.

But the lure of a technique outside of ourselves is strong. Before having experienced the power of therapeutic relationships, it is difficult to see how a therapeutic relationship—with another human, no matter professional status—can heal. Duncan, Miller and Sparks (2004) explained that “the mental health field remains dangerously enamored of flashy techniques and miracle cures” (p. 38).

*The Heart of Counseling* is a skills text focused on helping you value and form powerful therapeutic relationships. We discuss how counseling techniques, skill-teaching in sessions, counseling modalities and theories—all that you do as counselor—integrate into your therapeutic relationships. But first we need to explain how therapeutic relationships *alone* are powerful in generating positive change for persons in need.

The following concepts underlie the work of therapeutic relationships. They are understandings that bind together all the works of counselors. They guide the skills we employ in our works. Contemplating and understanding these concepts helps sustain us through difficult moments in our works. We speak personally about these concepts and from our own experience. Before you read, consider the following guidelines, as it is likely that you will react personally and from your own experience to what you read.

## Important Guidance for Your Study of these Concepts

### Avoid Intellectual Overload

We encourage you to read slowly and to contemplate. While these concepts are interrelated, you may not want to read them all at once. Stop to consider each concept and your own views and reactions as you read. Perhaps stop to write your reactions after each concept (e.g., excited agreement with some parts, troubled disagreement with others, questions you would like answered to help you understand, questions you would like to discuss).

## Remember that Experience is the Best Teacher

There are examples to aid understanding throughout this chapter, but many more throughout the skills portions of this book. Additionally, as you practice the skills of *The Heart of Counseling*, the underlying concepts will become clearer.

Learning and coming to know what you know, and believing what you believe through your practice and work is part of your development as a scholar and counselor. We only introduce these important underlying concepts in this chapter. Your deep understanding, your *knowing*, will develop from experience of the skills that are the focus of this book. Fully understanding these concepts may be the ongoing work of a lifetime for you, as it is for us.

## Twelve Key Concepts

### Becoming

Throughout the counseling field and all approaches to counseling, there is the notion that we are constantly changing, or *becoming*. Who we are today is not who we were in the past. The notion of becoming is that we are not permanently established at any point in our development. Rather, we are always becoming who we are. Becoming includes growth and age, of course, but also change through new experiences and meaning made from new experiences. Becoming assumes changes in context and resources, of course, but also internal change.

Internal change is physical, as well as psychological. McHenry, Sikorski and McHenry (2014) explained a key concept from neurobiology for counselors related to becoming: “Neuroplasticity theory clearly suggests that as each individual grows, develops, and incorporates new learnings, his or her brain is constantly modified and restructured. Consequently, the brain you had yesterday is not the same brain you have today” (p. 8). From their review of neuroplasticity and psychosocial genomics, Garland and Howard (2009) concluded that not only do new neuro-pathways and new brain tissue develop throughout our lives, but gene expression, the genetic code guiding the construction proteins from amino acids may also be affected by interactive experiences. Garland and Howard concluded: “Although our genes provide a basic outline for development, environmental influences such as social experiences shape gene expression and ultimately make us unique individuals” (p. 195).

### Self-Actualization

With the concept of becoming stated, it also seems well established in the counseling field that there is a formative or actualizing tendency (Bohart & Tallman, 1999; Ellingham, 2002; Morowitz, 2004; Sheldon & Houser-

Marko, 2001). As with most chapters, we will limit extensive literature review in favor of readability as we explain self-actualization and the fellow concepts that stem from it in nurturing the growth of persons in need.

Every person is on a unique path to optimal existence. Each path is unique because each person's set of experiences, and especially each person's interpretation of experiences, is unique. This essence—this unique and crucial self—is at the root of a person's ability to develop and grow in positive, pro-social directions. This essence is “meant to be” from the beginning and so will continue to strive—even through adverse and troublesome times—to fully develop. The concept of self-actualization maintains that there is a unique, positive and mature ideal for each living person.

We are amazed with the unique beauty of each tomato in our garden. If you slice one near where its stem was, there is a green star-shape in the red tomato background. Each star shape is beautiful. Each is unique. Yet each can be recognized as the familiar star-shape inside a tomato. While each whole tomato is unique, we can recognize when each has reached its version of a ripe, mature tomato. Nature provides many opportunities to reflect on how living things tend to strive for growth and maturation of “what was meant to be” from the beginning. In fact, it is almost impossible not to recognize the drive, determination and resilience of many plants to survive and continue to exist. Dandelions, for instance—impossible to destroy—are constantly seeking out the conditions to fully develop into dandelions. Those irresistible fluffy round tops are constantly luring children (and some adults) to pick and blow—sending their multitudes of seedlings throughout the world. Just for the chance to get a wish! Those bright yellow flowers pop up everywhere, and actually duck when the lawnmower passes over them. How resilient and clever.

The concept of self-actualization maintains that each individual person's unique self—or essence—is likewise resilient, clever and *impossible to destroy*. In multitudes of humans—despite the pressure to conform and live up to cultural, societal, parental and other expectations—there is only one real you. And, like the star in the tomato, your essence is beautiful and unique. You will continue to develop into a human being, for that is what you are. However, you are not merely the expression of a class of living things, nor are you simply the end result of your past experiences and genetic makeup. The concept of self-actualization maintains that within each of us is our own crucial and unique self—sometimes waiting or hiding or resting—but ever resilient and clever, and wanting to grow in a positive, productive and pro-social direction.

At one time we wondered, and it is sometimes asked in classes, if each person is on a unique path to self-actualization, why wouldn't one, if given the opportunity, actualize into pure evil? Why is actualization positive? How can we be assured that actualization for some beings does not mean the allowance for the most perfectly developed evil beings? Are some human beings “rotten to the core” or “bad seeds” from the beginning? When a