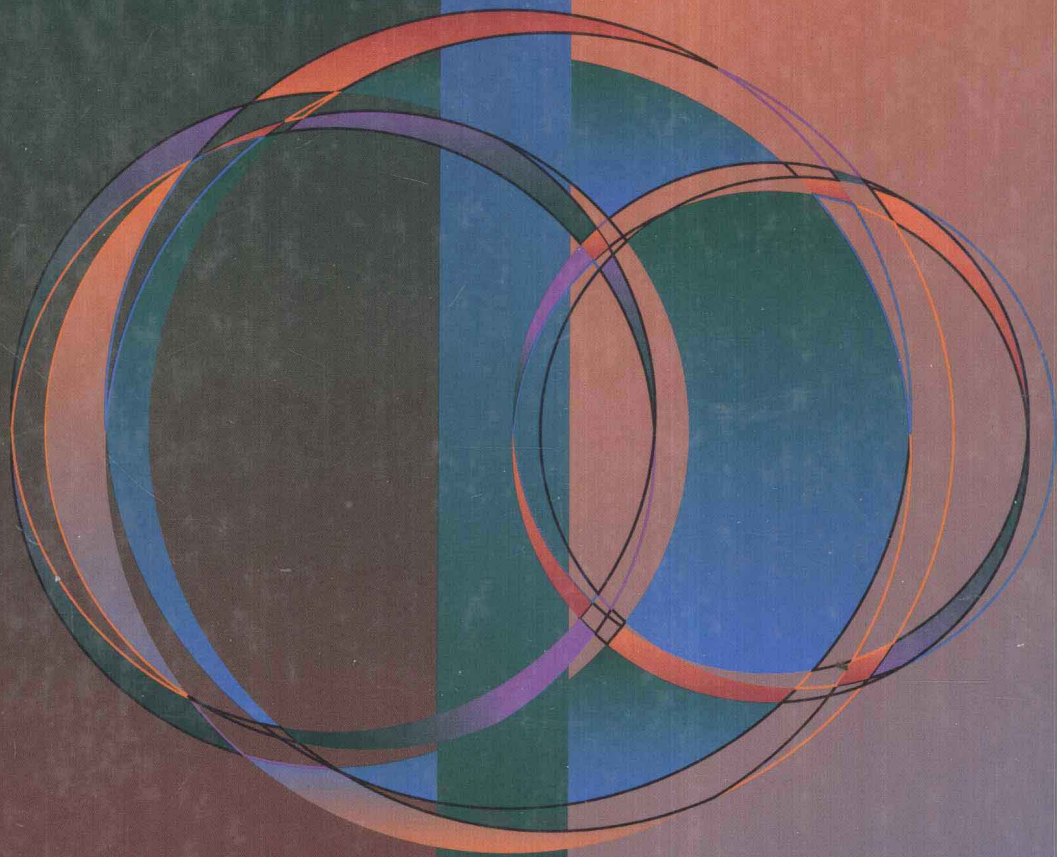


Gerard Egan



The Skilled Helper

**A PROBLEM-MANAGEMENT
APPROACH TO HELPING**

SIXTH EDITION

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THE SKILLED HELPER

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APPROACH TO HELPING

Gerard Egan

Professor Emeritus
Loyola University of Chicago



BROOKS/COLE PUBLISHING COMPANY

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Pacific Grove • Albany • Belmont • Bonn • Boston • Cincinnati • Detroit • Johannesburg
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Sponsoring Editor: *Eileen Murphy*
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Manuscript Editor: *Carole R. Crouse*

Interior Design: *John Edeen*
Interior Illustration: *Lotus Art*
Cover Design: *Katherine Minerva*
Typesetting: *ColorType, San Diego*
Cover Printing: *Phoenix Color Corporation*
Printing and Binding:
R. R. Donnelley/Crawfordsville

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For more information, contact:

BROOKS/COLE PUBLISHING COMPANY
511 Forest Lodge Road
Pacific Grove, CA 93950
USA

International Thomson Publishing Europe
Berkshire House 168-173
High Holborn
London WC1V 7AA
England

Thomas Nelson Australia
102 Dodds Street
South Melbourne, 3205
Victoria, Australia

Nelson Canada
1120 Birchmount Road
Scarborough, Ontario
Canada M1K 5G4

International Thomson Editores
Seneca 53
Col. Polanco
11560 México, D. F., México

International Thomson Publishing GmbH
Königswinterer Strasse 418
53227 Bonn
Germany

International Thomson Publishing Asia
221 Henderson Road
#05-10 Henderson Building
Singapore 0315

International Thomson Publishing Japan
Hirakawacho Kyowa Building, 3F
2-2-1 Hirakawacho
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10 9 8 7 6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Egan, Gerard.

The skilled helper : a problem-management approach to helping /

Gerard Egan. — 6th ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 0-534-34948-X (alk. paper)

1. Counseling. 2. Helping behavior. I. Title.

BF637.C6E39 1998

158'.3—dc21

97-17270

CIP



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THE SKILLED HELPER

Gerard Egan

Gerard Egan, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Organization Development and Psychology in the Center for Organization Development of Loyola University of Chicago. He has written over a dozen books, some in the field of counseling and communication, including *The Skilled Helper*, *Interpersonal Living*, and *People in Systems*. *The Skilled Helper*, translated into both European and Asian languages, is currently the most widely used counseling text in the world.

His other books, dealing with business and management, include *Change Agent Skills in Helping and Human Service Settings*, *Change Agent Skills A: Designing and Assessing Excellence*, *Change Agent Skills B: Managing Innovation and Change*, *Adding Value: A Systematic Guide to Business-Based Management and Leadership*, and *Working the Shadow Side: A Guide to Positive Behind-the-Scenes Management*. Through these writings, complemented by extensive consulting, he has created a comprehensive business-based system of management focusing on strategy, operations, structure, human resource management, the managerial role itself, and leadership. The management system includes a framework for initiating and managing change and a framework for managing such “shadow-side” complexities as organizational culture and politics and resistance to change. He has lectured, consulted, and given workshops in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. In China he has worked with university- and community-based professionals on counselor-training systems.

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PREFACE

Those intending to enter one of the helping professions will find a professional landscape that has been drastically altered over the past decade. Managed care for both physical and behavioral problems has become the norm. The number of psychologists in private practice has steadily declined as managed-care group practices have grown. Some helpers readily embrace managed care, others see it as a political and economic reality, and still others condemn it as “immoral” (see Broskowski, 1995; Fox, 1995; Fraser, 1996; “Managed Care,” 1996, 323–325; Miller, 1996; Patricelli & Lee, 1996; Rosenberg, 1996). Furthermore, third-party payers are demanding that helpers improve the quality of their psychological services and make themselves more accountable for results (Steenbarger & Smith, 1996).

The practical helping model outlined in the pages of this book — problem management and opportunity development — can help human-service providers meet these challenges. There are many reasons for using a helping model based on problem solving:

- Problem solving is one of the most highly researched paradigms in psychology. It is not fad. It is not based on an unsupported theory.
- Problem management and opportunity development constitute key dynamics underlying every form of helping. The reason for this is that the process focuses on the client’s needs, not the assumptions of a theory.
- The basic problem-solving process or model is universal; therefore, it crosses cultures easily and is easily adapted to cultural differences.
- It is practical. Since it deals with individuals and focuses on results, it is useful in managed-care environments. Each case is a study in itself; goals are set and progress toward those goals is plotted.
- Clients recognize, understand, and can use the problem-management process, once it is shared with them. A mutual understanding of the helping process allows clients and helpers to become partners.
- Once the helping process is mutually owned, then helping sessions become “labs” in which clients learn how to become better problem managers and opportunity developers in their everyday lives.
- Helpers can use the problem-management framework to organize a wide range of helping methods to serve their clients. The framework becomes

a tool in helping them spot and integrate the best of research and the best of new methods into their practice.

Therefore, no matter what approach to helping a helper ultimately adopts, the problem-managing and opportunity-developing framework together with the communication skills and methods that make it work provides a valuable foundation and adds substance to the practice of any approach to helping.

As you will see, the approach espoused here focuses not just on problems but also on unused opportunities. At its best, it is about strengths rather than weaknesses. In helping clients, helpers (and I include myself) tend to focus most of their attention on problem situations rather than missed opportunities. Problems are center stage; they grab our attention. Missed opportunities languish in the shadows; they are too easily overlooked. Certainly problems cannot be ignored because of their “in your face” character. Nor should they. However, clients can often manage or even transcend problems by focusing on opportunities.

In our society, prevention, like unused opportunities, gets short shrift. The problem-management and opportunity-development framework would provide much greater benefit to individuals, indeed to society itself, if it were more widely used in the interest of prevention. The economics of prevention are well known. Many studies demonstrate that prevention “works,” even though there is disagreement on how to go about doing it (Albee & Ryan-Finn, 1993; Cole, Watt, West, Hawkins, Asarnow, Markman, Ramey, Shure, & Long, 1993; Heller, 1993; Humphreys, 1996; Landsman, 1994; Lieberman, 1997; Perry & Albee, 1994). Resources spent on preventing social-emotional, physical, family, workplace, and societal problems provide a “return” that is much greater than the return from resources spent on cure. Despite this, the institutions of society continue to underspend on prevention. It isn’t sexy. The helping professions keep talking about prevention, but in the end it is not personally, socially, or politically compelling. Indeed, the world’s indifference to prevention is one of the reasons for the current crisis in both physical and social-emotional health care.

The problem-management process and skills outlined in this book are even more valuable when used preventively. When I ask parents how important — on a scale from 1 to 100 — interpersonal communication skills and competency in problem-management are for their children, they rate both near 100. But when I ask them how their children learn these skills, the hemming and hawing begin. After a while, I summarize what I am hearing. “We live in a society,” I say, “in which these basic skills are extremely important, but we leave their development to chance.” The development of these skills is too important to be left to any one social setting. Ideally, they would be taught, modeled, and reinforced in all social settings — family, peer groups, school, church, and community. We have the belief that these skills are essential for our children, but we do not have the social or political will to do much about it.

When and how are we to find the common sense, courage, and political will to put such things as competency in interpersonal communication and problem management and other forms of prevention on the national agenda? Certainly pockets of excellence already exist — this or that individual, this or that family, this or that school, this or that church, this or that community, this or that government program. But these do not add up to a national commitment. We don't need prevention and skill development shoved down our throats the way managed care is today. We do need a movement that is so appealing that a critical mass of citizens would like to participate in it because of the benefits. Do we live in a society that can market almost anything except things that count the most?

For offering their comments and suggestions for this edition of *The Skilled Helper*, I would like to thank the following reviewers: Jean F. Ayers, Towson State University; Dale Blumen, University of Rhode Island; John Bowers, Northwest Missouri State University; Diane H. Coursol, Mankato State University; and Tracey Manning, The College of Notre Dame of Maryland.

Gerard Egan

CONTENTS

PART ONE

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK 1

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION 3

FORMAL AND INFORMAL HELPERS—A VERY BRIEF HISTORY 4

WHAT HELPING IS ABOUT 4

 Clients with Problem Situations and Unused Opportunities 5

 The Two Principal Goals of Helping 6

DOES HELPING HELP? THE GOOD, THE CAUTIONARY, AND THE BAD NEWS 9

IS HELPING FOR EVERYONE? 13

WHAT THIS BOOK IS—AND WHAT IT IS NOT 15

MOVING FROM SMART TO WISE: MANAGING THE SHADOW SIDE
OF HELPING 17

 The Downside: The Messiness of Helping 18

 The Upside: Common Sense and Wisdom in the Helping Professions 19

CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW OF THE HELPING MODEL 22

A NATURAL PROBLEM-MANAGEMENT PROCESS 23

THE SKILLED-HELPER MODEL 24

STAGE I: THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS—CLARIFICATION OF THE KEY ISSUES
CALLING FOR CHANGE 25

 Identifying and Clarifying Problem Situations and
 Unused Opportunities 25

 The Three “Steps” of Stage I 27

STAGE II: THE PREFERRED SCENARIO—HELPING CLIENTS DETERMINE WHAT THEY NEED AND WANT	27
Developing a Preferred Scenario	27
The Three “Steps” of Stage II	28
STAGE III: STRATEGIES FOR ACTION—HELPING CLIENTS DISCOVER HOW TO GET WHAT THEY NEED AND WANT	29
Developing Action Strategies	29
The Three “Steps” of Stage III	30
ACTION: MAKING IT ALL HAPPEN—HELPING CLIENTS TURN DECISIONS INTO PROBLEM-MANAGING ACTION	30
ONGOING EVALUATION OF THE HELPING PROCESS: HOW ARE WE DOING?	32
FLEXIBILITY IN THE USE OF THE MODEL	33
DEVELOPING A WHOLE-PROCESS MENTALITY: MINIVERSIONS OF THE ENTIRE MODEL	36
UNDERSTANDING AND DEALING WITH THE SHADOW SIDE OF HELPING MODELS	36

CHAPTER 3

THE HELPING RELATIONSHIP: VALUES IN ACTION 39

THE HELPING RELATIONSHIP	40
THE WORKING ALLIANCE	41
THE CULTURE OF HELPING: VALUES IN ACTION	42
Putting Values into the Broader Context of Culture	42
The Importance and Practicality of Values in Helping	43
THE VALUE OF RESPECT	44
Norms That Translate Respect into Behaviors	44
Norms Related to Diversity and Multiculturalism	46
Guidelines Related to Diversity and Multiculturalism	49
THE VALUE OF GENUINENESS: BEYOND PROFESSIONALISM AND PHONINESS	50
THE VALUE OF CLIENT EMPOWERMENT: HELPING CLIENTS DEVELOP SELF-RESPONSIBILITY	51
Helping as a Social-Influence Process	51
Norms for Empowerment and Self-Responsibility	52
A WORKING CHARTER: THE CLIENT-HELPER CONTRACT	55
SHADOW-SIDE REALITIES IN THE RELATIONSHIP	56

PART TWO**BASIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR HELPING 59****CHAPTER 4****ATTENDING, LISTENING, AND UNDERSTANDING 61**

ATTENDING: BEING VISIBLY TUNED IN TO CLIENTS 62

The Microskills of Attending 63

The Helper's Nonverbal Communication 64

ACTIVE LISTENING 65

 Listening to and Understanding Verbal Messages: Experiences, Behavior,
 and Affect 66

Listening to the Client's Nonverbal Messages and Modifiers 70

Listening to and Understanding Clients in Context 72

Empathic Listening 73

Tough-Minded Listening: Hearing the Slant or Spin 74

THE SHADOW SIDE OF LISTENING TO CLIENTS 75

LISTENING TO ONESELF: THE HELPER'S SHADOW CONVERSATION 78

CHAPTER 5**BASIC EMPATHY 80**THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF RESPONDING SKILLS: PERCEPTIVENESS, KNOW-HOW,
AND ASSERTIVENESS 81

BASIC EMPATHY: COMMUNICATING UNDERSTANDING TO CLIENTS 83

THE KEY ELEMENTS OF BASIC EMPATHY 84

The Basic-Empathy Formula 84

Experiences, Behaviors, and Feelings as Elements of Empathy 85

PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE THE USE OF BASIC EMPATHY 89

POOR SUBSTITUTES FOR EMPATHY 95

TACTICS FOR COMMUNICATING EMPATHY 97

A CAUTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHIC RELATIONSHIPS 98

CHAPTER 6**THE ART OF PROBING AND SUMMARIZING 100**

PRINCIPLES IN THE USE OF PROBES 102

Use Probes to Help Clients Achieve Concreteness and Clarity 102

Use Probes to Help Clients Fill in Missing Pieces of the Picture	103
Use Probes to Help Clients Get a Balanced View of Problem Situations	104
Use Probes to Help Clients Move into Beneficial Stages and Steps of the Helping Process	105
Use Probes to Help Clients Move Forward within Some Step of the Process	106
Use Probes to Have Clients Ask Themselves, "What's Going On?"	107
THE ART OF SUMMARIZING: PROVIDING FOCUS AND DIRECTION	108
INTEGRATING COMMUNICATION SKILLS: THE SEAMLESS USE OF ATTENDING, LISTENING, UNDERSTANDING, EMPATHY, PROBING, AND SUMMARIZING	110
BECOMING PROFICIENT AT COMMUNICATION SKILLS	113
THE SHADOW SIDE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS	114

PART THREE

STAGE I OF THE HELPING MODEL AND ADVANCED COMMUNICATION SKILLS 115

CHAPTER 7

STEP I-A: HELPING CLIENTS TELL THEIR STORIES 119

THE GOALS OF STEP I-A	120
HELPING CLIENTS EXPLORE PROBLEM SITUATIONS AND UNEXPLOITED OPPORTUNITIES	121
Learn to Work with All Styles of Storytelling	121
Help Clients Clarify Key Issues	123
Assess the Severity of the Client's Problems	124
Help Clients Talk Productively about the Past	126
As Clients Tell Their Stories, Search for Resources	128
Help Clients Spot and Explore Unused Opportunities	130
Step I-A and Action	132
THE SHADOW SIDE OF STEP I-A	134
Clients as Storytellers	134
The Nature of Discretionary Change	134
EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP I-A	136

CHAPTER 8

RELUCTANT AND RESISTANT CLIENTS 137

RELUCTANCE—MISGIVINGS ABOUT CHANGE 138

RESISTANCE—REACTING TO COERCION 140

PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGING RELUCTANCE AND RESISTANCE 142

Avoid Unhelpful Responses to Reluctance and Resistance 142

Develop Productive Approaches to Dealing with Reluctance and Resistance 143

CHAPTER 9

STEP I-B: I. THE NATURE OF CHALLENGING — HELPING CLIENTS CHALLENGE THEMSELVES 146

INTRODUCTION TO CHALLENGING: HELPING CLIENTS DEAL WITH THEIR
BLIND SPOTS 147

THE GOALS OF CHALLENGING 150

Help Clients Develop New Perspectives 151

Help Clients Link New Perspectives to Constructive Behavioral Change 152

Help Clients Challenge and Change Self-Limiting Internal Behavior 153

Help Clients Challenge and Change Self-Limiting External Behavior 156

Help Clients Find Strengths amid Their Weaknesses 158

THE CONTENT OF CHALLENGE: COMMON DYSFUNCTIONAL MIND-SETS AND
BEHAVIOR FOUND IN HELPING SETTINGS 158

Invite Clients to Own Their Problems and Unused Opportunities 158

Invite Clients to State Their Problems as Solvable 160

Invite Clients to Move beyond Flawed Interpretations 161

Invite Clients to Challenge the Predictable Dishonesties of Life 161

CHALLENGE AND THE SHADOW SIDE OF CLIENTS: SHADOW-SIDE RESPONSES
TO CHALLENGE 164

CHALLENGE AND THE SHADOW SIDE OF HELPERS 166

CHAPTER 10

STEP I-B: II. SPECIFIC CHALLENGING SKILLS 169

ADVANCED EMPATHY: THE MESSAGE BEHIND THE MESSAGE 170

Help Clients Make the Implied Explicit 172

Help Clients Identify Themes in Their Stories 172

Help Clients Make Connections They May Be Missing 173

Advanced Empathy as Sharing Hunches with Clients 174

INFORMATION SHARING: FROM NEW PERSPECTIVES TO ACTION	176
HELPER SELF-DISCLOSURE	178
IMMEDIACY: DIRECT, MUTUAL TALK	180
Types of Immediacy in Helping and Principles for Using Them	180
Situations Calling for Immediacy	183
USING SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	184
CONFRONTATION	186
EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP I-B	187

CHAPTER 11

STEP I-B: III. THE WISDOM OF CHALLENGING	188
GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE CHALLENGING	189
Keep the Goals of Challenging in Mind	189
Encourage Self-Challenge	189
Earn the Right to Challenge	190
Be Tentative but Not Apologetic in the Way You Challenge Clients	190
Challenge Unused Strengths More Than Weaknesses	191
Build on the Client's Successes	192
Be Specific in Your Challenges	192
Respect Clients' Values	193
Dealing Honestly, Caringly, and Creatively with Client Defensiveness	194
LINKING CHALLENGE TO ACTION	194
Is Challenge Enough to Stimulate Problem-Managing Action?	195
Self-Efficacy: "I Can, I Will."	195
EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP I-B	199

CHAPTER 12

STEP I-C: LEVERAGE: HELPING CLIENTS	
WORK ON THE RIGHT THINGS	201
CLIENTS AS DECISION MAKERS	202
Rational Decision Making	202
The Shadow Side of Decision Making: Choices in Everyday Life	203
THE GOALS OF STEP I-C	206
SCREENING: THE INITIAL SEARCH FOR LEVERAGE	208
LEVERAGE: WORKING ON ISSUES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE	209
Some Principles of Leverage	210
A No-Formula Approach	214

FOCUS AND LEVERAGE: THE LAZARUS TECHNIQUE	215
STEP I-C AND ACTION	216
EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP I-C	218

PART FOUR

STAGE II: HELPING CLIENTS DETERMINE WHAT THEY NEED AND WANT 219

CHAPTER 13

STEP II-A: WHAT DO YOU NEED AND WANT?

POSSIBILITIES FOR A BETTER FUTURE 225

POSSIBILITIES FOR A BETTER FUTURE 226

SKILLS FOR IDENTIFYING POSSIBILITIES FOR A BETTER FUTURE 227

Creativity and Helping 227

Divergent Thinking 228

Brainstorming: A Tool for Divergent Thinking 229

Future-Oriented Probes 231

Models as a Source of Possibilities 233

POSSIBILITIES FOR A BETTER DEATH: A CASE 234

A FAMILY CASE 235

EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP II-A 237

CHAPTER 14

STEP II-B: WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT?

MOVING FROM POSSIBILITIES TO CHOICES 238

FROM POSSIBILITIES TO CHOICES 239

HELPING CLIENTS SHAPE THEIR GOALS 239

Help Clients State What They Need and Want as Outcomes
or Accomplishments 240

Help Clients Move from Broad Aims to Clear and Specific Goals 241

Help Clients Establish Goals That Make a Difference 244

Help Clients Set Goals That Are Prudent 245

Help Clients Formulate Realistic Goals 246

Help Clients Set Goals That Can Be Sustained 247

- Help Clients Choose Goals That Have Some Flexibility 247
- Help Clients Choose Goals Consistent with Their Values 248
- Help Clients Establish Realistic Time Frames for the Accomplishment of Goals 249

NEEDS VERSUS WANTS 251

EMERGING GOALS 252

ADAPTIVE VERSUS STRETCH GOALS 253

ACTION BIAS AS A METAGOAL 254

EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP II-B 256

CHAPTER 15

STEP II-C: COMMITMENT—WHAT ARE YOU WILLING TO PAY FOR WHAT YOU WANT? 257

HELPING CLIENTS COMMIT THEMSELVES 258

- Help Clients Set Goals That Don't Cost More Than They Are Worth 259

- Help Clients Set Appealing Goals 260

- Help Clients Own the Goals They Set 260

- Help Clients Deal with Competing Agendas 263

STAGE II AND ACTION 264

THE SHADOW SIDE OF GOAL SETTING 265

EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP II-C 267

PART FIVE

STAGE III: HELPING CLIENTS WORK FOR WHAT THEY NEED AND WANT 269

CHAPTER 16

STEP III-A: STRATEGIES FOR ACTION—WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO GET WHAT I NEED AND WANT? 273

HOW MANY WAYS ARE THERE TO GET WHAT I NEED AND WANT? 274

- Help Clients Brainstorm Strategies for Accomplishing Goals 274

- Develop Frameworks for Stimulating Clients' Thinking about Strategies 277

WHAT RESOURCES DO I NEED TO GET WHAT I WANT? THE FOCUS ON SOCIAL SUPPORT 279

WHAT WORKING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS WILL HELP ME GET WHAT I NEED AND WANT? 281

LINKING STRATEGIES TO ACTION 282

EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP III-A 285

CHAPTER 17

STEP III-B: BEST-FIT STRATEGIES — WHAT STRATEGIES ARE BEST FOR ME? 286

WHAT'S BEST FOR ME? THE CASE OF BUD 287

HELPING CLIENTS CHOOSE BEST-FIT STRATEGIES 288

STRATEGY SAMPLING 291

A BALANCE-SHEET METHOD FOR CHOOSING STRATEGIES 292

 Benefits of Choosing the Residential Program 292

 Costs of Choosing the Residential Program 293

 Realism in Using the Balance Sheet 295

LINKING STEP III-B TO ACTION 295

THE SHADOW SIDE OF SELECTING STRATEGIES 296

EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP III-B 298

CHAPTER 18

STEP III-C: HELPING CLIENTS MAKE PLANS — WHAT KIND OF PLAN WILL HELP ME GET WHAT I NEED AND WANT? 299

NO PLAN OF ACTION: THE CASE OF FRANK 300

HOW PLANS ADD VALUE TO CLIENTS' CHANGE PROGRAMS 301

SHAPING THE PLAN: THREE CASES 303

HUMANIZING THE TECHNOLOGY OF CONSTRUCTIVE CHANGE 306

 Build a Planning Mentality into the Helping Process Right from the Start 306

 Adapt the Constructive-Change Process to the Style of the Client 307

 Collaborate with Clients in Tailoring Generic Programs to Their Needs 308

 Devise a Plan for the Client and Then Work with the Client on Tailoring It to His or Her Needs 309

EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR STEP III-C 311