

Wisdom is about excellence in living. As such, it focuses on knowing "how" (the procedural dimension) rather than merely knowing "what" (the factual dimension).

Wisdom, then, is critical in helping others. Such things as wisdom and common sense can be considered part of the upside shadows because they have not received a great deal of attention in the helping literature and they do not form part of the curriculum in helper training programs. Perhaps this is beginning to change.

Even the downside of the shadow side of helping can provide benefits. Consider an analogy. The shadow side of helping is a kind of "noise" in the system. But scientists have discovered that sometimes a small amount of noise in a system, called *stochastic resonance*, makes the system more sensitive and efficient (Economist, 1995). For instance, in the helping professions, noise in the guise of the debate around what makes helping both effective and efficient can ultimately benefit clients.

Despite the downside of the shadow side of helping, the tone of this book is unabashedly upbeat. However, helpers-to-be must not ignore the less palatable dimensions of the helping professions, including the less palatable dimensions of themselves. Therefore, throughout this book, some of the common shadow-side realities that plague client, helper, and the profession itself are noted at the service of managing them. This book is by no means a treatise on the shadow side of helping. Rather, its intent is to get helpers to begin to think about the shadow side of the profession. Wise helpers are idealistic without being naive. They also know the difference between realism and cynicism and opt for the former. They see the journey "from smart to wise" as a never-ending one.



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Problem management as underlying process

The "browser" approach

**UNDERSTANDING AND DEALING WITH THE SHADOW SIDE OF HELPING MODELS**

No model

Fads

Rigid applications of helping models

Virtuosity

**RATIONAL PROBLEM SOLVING AND  
ITS LIMITATIONS**

The problem-solving process is often described as a more or less straightforward, natural, and rational process of decision making. For instance, Yankelovich (1992) offered a seven-step process. Applied to helping, it looks something like this:

- **Initial awareness.** First, the client becomes aware of an issue or a set of issues. For instance, a couple, after a number of disputes over household finances, develop a vague awareness of dissatisfaction with the relationship itself.
- **Urgency.** Second, a sense of urgency develops, especially as the underlying problem situation—the dissatisfaction with the relationship itself—becomes more distressing. Even small annoyances are now seen in the light of overall dissatisfaction.
- **Initial search for remedies.** Third, the client begins to look for remedies. However implicitly or perfunctorily, the client explores different strategies for managing the problem situation. For instance, a client in a difficult marriage begins thinking about complaining openly to her partner or friends, separating, getting a divorce, instituting subtle acts of revenge, having an affair, going to a marriage counselor, seeing a minister, unilaterally withdrawing from the relationship in some way, and so forth. The client may try out one more of these remedies without evaluating their cost or consequences.
- **Estimation of costs.** Fourth, the costs of pursuing different remedies begin to become apparent. Someone in a troubled relationship might say to herself: "Being open and honest hasn't really worked. If I continue to put my cards on the table, I'll have to go through the agony of confrontation, denial, argument, counter accusations, and who knows what else." Or he might say, "Simply withdrawing from the relationship in small ways has been painful. What would I do if I were to go out on my own?" Or, "What would happen to the kids?" At this point, the client often backs away from dealing with the problem situation directly because there is no cost-free or painless way of dealing with it.
- **Deliberation.** Fifth, since the problem situation does not go away, it is impossible to retreat completely. At this point, a more serious weighing of choices takes place. For instance, the costs of confronting the situation are weighed against the costs of merely withdrawing. Often, a kind of dialogue goes on in the client's mind between steps 4 and 5; for example, "I might have to go through the agony of a separation for the kids' sake. Maybe time apart is what we need."
- **Rational decision.** Sixth, an intellectual decision is made to accept some choice and pursue a certain course of action: "I'm going bring all of this up with my spouse and suggest we see a marriage counselor." Or, "I'm going to get on with my life, find other things to do, and let the marriage go where it will."
- **Rational-emotional decision.** However, a merely intellectual decision is often not enough to drive action. So the heart joins the head, as it were, in the decision. One spouse might finally say, "I've had enough of this! I'm leaving. It won't be comfortable, but it's better than living like this." The other might say, "It is unfair to both of us to go on like this, and it's certainly not good for the kids," and

this drives the decision to seek help, even if it means going alone. Decisions driven by emotion and convictions are more likely to be translated into action.

Four things should be noted. First, these steps, however logically sequenced on paper, are often jumbled and intermingled in real-life problem-management situations. Second, this natural process can be derailed at almost any point along the way. For instance, uncontrolled emotions can spill out and make a bad situation worse. Or the costs of managing the problem seem too high and so the process itself is put on the back burner. Third, decision making in difficult situations is seldom as rational as this process suggests. Indeed, decision making can be viewed as a journey as complex as life itself (Scott, 2000). Fourth, this natural process often lacks a method for turning decisions into solution-focused action.

The problem-management and opportunity-development process outlined in this chapter and developed in the rest of the book borrows from this natural process, complements it with other steps and techniques, suggests ways of helping clients turn decisions into action, focuses on solutions, that is, life-enhancing outcomes, provides ways of challenging backsliding, and, at its best, speeds up the entire process.

### THE SKILLED HELPER MODEL: A PROBLEM-MANAGEMENT AND OPPORTUNITY-DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO HELPING

Common sense suggests that problem-solving models, techniques, and skills are important for all of us, since all of us must grapple daily with problems in living of greater or lesser severity. Ask parents whether problem-management skills are important for their children, and they would say "Certainly." But ask where and how their children pick up these skills, and they hem and haw: "Sometimes at home, but not always." Parents don't always see themselves as paragons of effective problem solving: "Maybe at school," some would wonder. Yet review the curricula of our primary, secondary, and tertiary schools, and you will find little about problem solving that focuses on problems in living. Some say that formal courses in problem-solving skills are not found in our schools because such skills can only be learned through experience. To a certain extent, that's true. However, if problem-management skills are so important, we might wonder why society leaves the acquisition of these skills to chance. A problem-solving mentality should be second nature to us. The world may be the laboratory for problem solving, but the skills needed to optimize learning in this lab should be taught. They are too important to be left to chance.

Let's move to the helping professions. Institute an Internet search and you will soon discover that there are dozens, if not hundreds, of models or approaches to helping, all of them claiming a high degree of success. Library shelves are filled with books on counseling and psychotherapy—books dealing with theory, research, and practice. Back in the 1980s, it was estimated that there were between 250 and 400 different approaches to helping (see Herink, 1980; Karasu, 1986). Some of the approaches discussed then have, of course, fallen by the wayside, but many more have

been added since. All are proposed with equal seriousness and their proponents say that they work. In the face of all this diversity, helpers, especially beginning helpers, need a basic, practical, working model of helping.

Since all approaches must eventually help clients manage problems and develop unused resources, the model of choice outlined in these pages is a flexible, humanistic, broadly based problem-management and opportunity-development model—a model that is straightforward without ignoring the complexities of clients' lives or of the helping process itself. Indeed, since the problem-management and opportunity-development process outlined in this book is embedded in almost all approaches to helping, this model provides an excellent foundation for any "brand" of helping you eventually choose. This book provides the basics for them all. Finally, a problem-management model in counseling and therapy has the advantage of the vast amount of research that has been done on the problem-solving process itself. The model, techniques, and skills outlined in this book tap that research base.

### THE STAGES AND STEPS OF THE HELPING MODEL

All worthwhile helping frameworks, models, or processes ultimately help clients ask and answer for themselves four fundamental questions:

- What's going on? What are the problems, issues, concerns, or undeveloped opportunities I should be working on?
- What do I need or want? What do I want my life to look like? What changes would make me happier?
- What do I have to do to get what I need or want? What plan will get me where I want to go?
- How do I get results? How do I turn planning and goal setting into solutions, results, outcomes, or accomplishments? How do I get going and keep going?

These four questions—turned into three logical "stages" and an implementation phase in Figure 2-1—provide the basic framework for the helping process. The term *stage* is in quotation marks because it has sequential overtones that are somewhat misleading. Each stage is a set of tasks around a theme that helps clients move forward in managing problems and developing opportunities. The theme of Stage I is problem/opportunity clarification and ownership. Stage II is about goal setting and commitment to goals. Stage III is about strategies for accomplishing goals. In practice, the three stages overlap and interact with one another as clients struggle to manage problems and develop opportunities. And, as we shall see, helping, like life itself, is not as logical as the models used to describe it.

This chapter presents an extended example to bring this process to life. The case, though real, has been disguised and simplified. It is not a session-by-session presentation. Rather, it illustrates ways in which one client was helped to ask and answer the four fundamental questions just outlined. The client, Carlos, is voluntary, verbal, and for the most part, cooperative. In actual practice, cases do not always flow as easily as this one. The simplification of the case, however, will help you see the main features of the helping process in action.

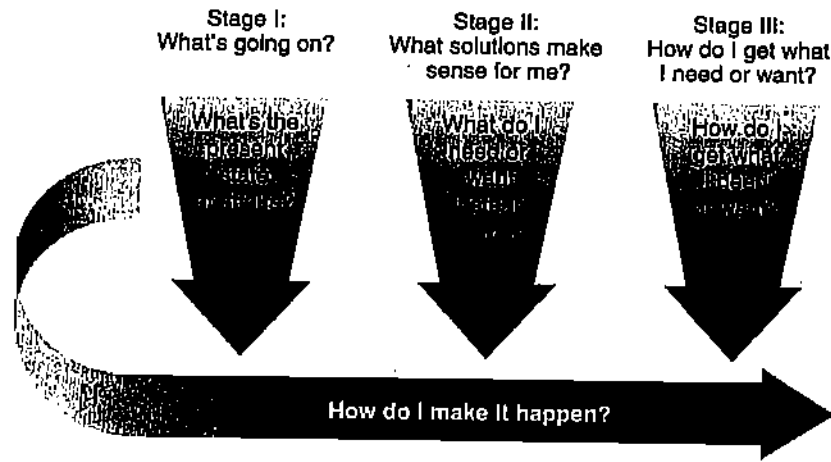


FIGURE 2-1  
The Skilled Helper Model

### STAGE I: "WHAT'S GOING ON?" HELPING CLIENTS CLARIFY THE KEY ISSUES CALLING FOR CHANGE

The present state spells out the range of difficulties the client is facing. What are the problems, issues, concerns, and undeveloped opportunities with which Carlos needs to grapple? Here is a thumbnail sketch:

Carlos, a man in his mid-twenties, has been working for a consulting firm for about a year. He is well educated, though unlike some of his fellow workers, his undergraduate and MBA degrees are not from the "best" schools. He is bright, though practical rather than academic intelligence is his strong suit. He can be quite personable when he wants to be. But he doesn't always want to be. He comes from a family with traditional Hispanic cultural values. He can speak Spanish fairly well but prefers not to, even at home.

Trouble started when one of his colleagues, a consultant some 20 years older than Carlos, buttonholed him after a meeting one day and said: "I've seen you in action a few times. You know, you're your own worst enemy. You're headed for a fall and don't even know it. If I were you, I'd get some help." With that he walked away, and Carlos had no further interaction with him.

Though Carlos was first bothered by the incident, he sloughed it off. However, a few weeks later, while talking with one of his colleagues who had been at the firm for about three years, Carlos recounted the incident in a joking way. But his colleague didn't laugh. He merely said in a lighthearted manner, "Well, you never know, Carlos, there just might be something there."

Through the company, he has access to a couple of "developmental counselors." He is somewhat put off when he finds out that both of them are women, but he makes an appointment with one.

So here is a young man who has received a couple of shots across his bow. While he certainly doesn't think that he needs help, he is unsettled enough to be willing to talk with someone.

#### The Three Steps of Stage I

As we shall see in the chapters that follow, each "stage" is divided into three "steps." Like the stages themselves, the steps are not steps in a mechanistic, "first do this, then do this" sense. And like the stages, the steps are interactive. In Stage I, they are activities that help clients develop answers to two questions: *What's going on in my life? What should I work on?*

**Step I-A: Help clients tell their stories.** Though helping is ultimately about solutions, some review of the problem or missed opportunity is called for. So Elena, Carlos's counselor, helps him tell his story. Through their dialogue, she helps him review what is happening in the workplace. Elena knows that if she can help Carlos get an undistorted picture of himself, his problems, and his unused opportunities, he will have a better chance of doing something about them. Her overall goal is to help Carlos manage the interpersonal dimensions of his work life better. His interpersonal style is both problem and opportunity.

Carlos gets over his initial reluctance and brings up a number of things that bother him. He feels that he is being discriminated against at work. He doesn't feel that he's on the fast track, and he thinks that he should be. People at work don't understand and appreciate him. Though he lives at home because of financial reasons, he feels distant from his family. "We don't have that much in common anymore. They don't want to be mainstream." He and his girlfriend are currently at odds. At one point he says, "I think I've moved beyond her anyway."

**Step I-B: Help clients break through blind spots that prevent them from seeing themselves, their problem situations, and their unexplored opportunities as they really are.** Counselors add great value when they can help their clients identify significant blind spots related to their problems and unexplored opportunities. Effectively challenged, blind spots yield to new perspectives that help clients think more realistically about problems, opportunities, and solutions.

It does not take Elena long to realize that Carlos has some significant blind spots. For instance, he tends to blame others for his problems: "They are keeping me back." And he does not realize how self-centered he is. He gets angry when others stand in his way or don't cater to his needs and wants. Yet he is quite insensitive to anybody else's needs. His arrogant style rubs both colleagues and customers the wrong way. Without being brutal, Elena helps him see himself as others see him. She points out that being Hispanic and coming from the "wrong" school have little to do with his colleagues' hostility toward him. Elena, Hispanic herself, understands both Carlos's struggles and his excuses.

**Step I-C: Help clients choose the right problems and/or opportunities to work on.** If clients have a range of issues, help them gain *leverage* by working on issues that will make a difference. If a client wants to work only on trivialities or does not want to work at all, then it might be better to defer counseling.

Carlos becomes more cooperative as it becomes clear to him that Elena has both his interests and those of the firm in mind. He sees her as "solid"—decent, businesslike, and not overly "psychological." He comes to realize that, although he has a number of concerns, he had better work on his interpersonal communication style and his relationships with both colleagues and clients if he wants to advance in his career. He also needs to do something about the "victim" mentality he has developed. With Elena's help, he realizes that the flip side of his communication style problem is an enormous opportunity. He quickly sees that becoming a better communicator and relationship builder will help him in every social setting in life. Because they are in a work setting and time is limited, Elena does not push him on the problems he's having at home or in his social life outside work. However, she suspects that the changes he makes at work will also apply outside.

## STAGE II: "WHAT SOLUTIONS MAKE SENSE FOR ME?" HELPING CLIENTS DETERMINE OUTCOMES

In Stage II, counselors help clients explore and choose possibilities for a better future—a future in which clients can manage key problem situations and develop key opportunities. Helpers ask, "What do you want this future to look like?" The clients' answers constitute their "change agendas." Stage II focuses on outcomes.

Elena helps Carlos ask himself such questions as: What do I want? What do I need, whether I currently want it or not? What would my business life look like if it were more tolerable or—even better—more engaging and fulfilling?

Unfortunately, some approaches to problem solving or management skip Stage II. They move from the "What's wrong?" stage (Stage I) to a "What do I do about it?" stage (Stage III). As we shall see, however, helping clients discover what they want has a profound impact on the entire helping process.

### The Three Steps of Stage II

Stage II also has three steps—that is, three ways of helping clients answer as creatively as possible the question "What do I need or want?"

**Step II-A: Help clients use their imaginations to spell out possibilities for a better future.** This often helps clients move beyond the problem-and-misery mindset they bring with them and develop a sense of hope. Brainstorming possibilities for a better future can also help clients understand their problem situations better: "Now that I am beginning to know what I want, I can see my problems and unused opportunities more clearly."

Elena helps Carlos brainstorm goals that would help him repair some damaged relationships with both colleagues and clients and help him do something about his victim mentality. Carlos declares that he needs to become a "better communicator." Elena, pointing out that "becoming a better communicator" is a rather vague aspiration, asks him, "What do some of the good communicators you know look like?" Carlos comes up with a range of possibilities. "I'd give great presentations like Jeff." "I'd be a good problem solver like Sharon." "Tony listens a lot better than I do." "I'm not

patient at all, but I like it when Abigail is patient with me." "Roger seems to have good relationships with everyone." And so forth. All of these become possibilities for a better communication style. She also enables him to explore further possibilities by asking him what a "repaired relationship" would look like both from his perspective and from the perspective of customers and colleagues he might have alienated.

**Step II-B: Help clients choose realistic and challenging goals that are real solutions to the key problems and unexplored opportunities identified in Stage I.** Possibilities need to be turned into goals because helping is about solutions and outcomes. A client's goals, then, constitute his or her *agenda for change*. If goals are to be pursued and accomplished, they should be clear, related to the problems and unexplored opportunities the client has chosen to work on, substantive, realistic, prudent, sustainable, flexible, consistent with the client's values, and set in a reasonable time frame. Effective counselors help clients "shape" their agendas to meet these requirements.

Elena helps Carlos sort through some of the possibilities he has come up with. It becomes clear that changes in his interpersonal communication style would help him manage some problems and develop some opportunities at the same time. If he were to communicate well—in terms of both communication skills and the values that support relationship-building communication—he would come across more effectively and repair damaged relationships. But he needs more than skills. He needs to change his self-centered and "poor me" attitude. Some of the possibilities Carlos comes up with in his brainstorming session with Elena can be put aside for the present. For instance, things like "becoming a terrific presenter" can wait.

Becoming a better communicator coupled with upbeat interpersonal relationship values and attitudes is a substantial package. It includes Carlos's becoming good at the give and take of dialogue and the skills that make it work. These skills include visibly tuning in to others, active listening, thoughtfully processing what he hears, demonstrating understanding of the key points others are making, getting his own points across clearly, drawing others in to the conversation, and the like. It also includes embracing the values that make conversations serve relationships—mutual respect, social sensitivity, emotional control, and collaboration.

**Step II-C: Help clients find the incentives that will help them commit themselves to their change agendas.** The question clients must ask themselves is: "What am I willing to pay for what I need and want?" Without strong commitment, change agendas end up as no more than some "nice ideas." This does not mean that clients are not sincere in setting goals. Rather, once they leave the counseling session, they run into the demands of everyday life. The goals they set for themselves, however useful, face a great deal of competition. Counselors provide an important service when they help clients test their commitment to the better future embedded in the goals they choose.

Becoming a better communicator at the service of repairing and building relationships is hard work. Elena helps Carlos review the incentives he has for engaging in such work. One very strong one is this: He has to. His current interpersonal communication style will probably get him fired and prevent him from being successful in the future. Developing the values that should permeate dialogue is even harder work.

It means undoing bad habits developed over years. Undoing bad habits is difficult even when a client is committed to doing so. Elena does not dwell on Carlos's bad habits. Rather, she believes that embracing good habits—like showing interest in others and checking his understanding of what they have to say—will drive out his bad habits. If Carlos does all this work, the upside is enormous. Because communication is at the heart of everything he does, better communication skills and values will serve him well in every dimension of his life. Elena does not find it difficult to help Carlos appreciate this attractive package of incentives. Positive psychology wins. In Carlos's case, developing opportunities is the main way of managing problems.

### STAGE III: "WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO TO GET WHAT I NEED OR WANT?" HELPING CLIENTS DEVELOP STRATEGIES FOR ACCOMPLISHING GOALS

Stage III defines the actions that clients should take to translate goals into problem-managing accomplishments. Stage II answers the question: "How do I get there?" It is about identifying and choosing action strategies and plans.

#### The Three Steps of Stage III

Stage III, too, has three steps that, in practice, intermingle with one another and with the steps of the other stages.

**Step III-A: Possible actions:** Help clients see that there are many different ways of achieving their goals. Stimulating clients to think of different ways of achieving their goals is usually an excellent investment of time. That said, clients should not leap into action. Hasty and disorganized action is often self-defeating. Complaints such as "I tried this and it didn't work. Then I tried that and it didn't work either!" is often a sign of poor planning rather than of the impossibility of the task.

Elena helps Carlos explore different ways of becoming the competent communicator he wants to be so he can establish a better self-image and develop and foster satisfying work relationships with both colleagues and clients. To acquire the skills he needs, Carlos can read books, take courses at local colleges, attend courses for professionals, get a tutor or coach, or come up with his own approach to developing the skills and attitudes he needs. Elena helps Carlos brainstorm the possibilities. She also points out where he can get more information, but she then lets him do his homework.

**Step III-B: Help clients choose best-fit strategies.** While Step III-A provides clients with a pool of possible strategies, Step III-B helps clients choose the action strategies that best fit their talents, resources, style, temperament, environment, and timetable.

With Elena's help, Carlos makes some choices. He chooses to attend an interpersonal communication program for working professionals. Although more expensive than university-based courses, the program offers greater flexibility and fits better with Carlos's rather hectic travel schedule. Second, Elena helps Carlos see that life is his lab. That is, every conversation is part of the program—an opportunity to practice the skills he will be learning and demonstrate the attitudes

that foster relationship building. To Carlos's credit, he points out that he needs to find a way of monitoring the degree that the values of effective dialogue are permeating his conversations. He decides to get a peer coach—a colleague that has both an excellent communication style and positive relationships with colleagues and clients. He finds a colleague who fits the bill and who is willing to help. He says to his colleague: "Be honest with me. Tell me the way it is."

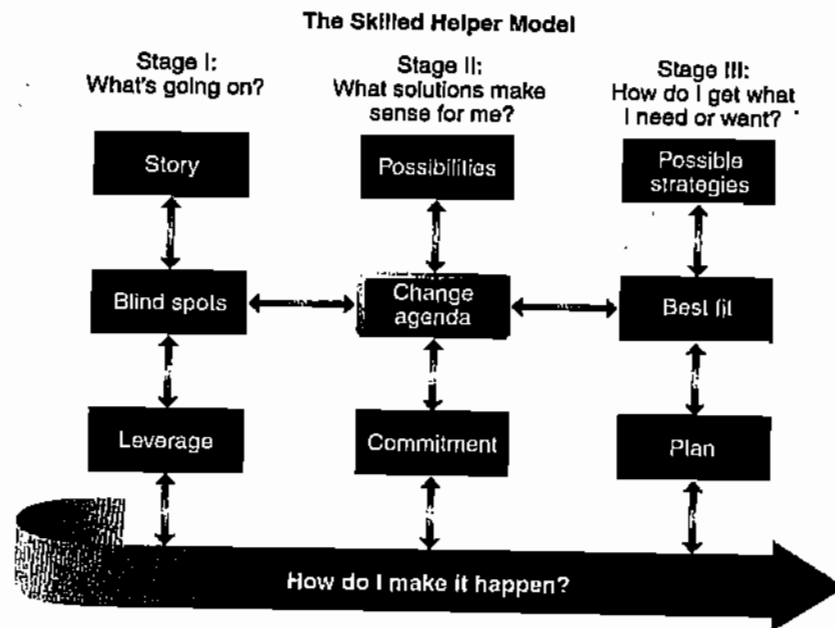
**Step III-C: Help clients craft a plan.** Help clients organize the actions they need to take to accomplish their goals. Plans are simply maps clients use to get where they want to go. A plan can be quite simple. Indeed, overly sophisticated plans are often self-defeating.

Carlos's plan is straightforward. He will begin the interpersonal communication course within two weeks. He will use every conversation with colleagues and clients as his lab. At the end of each working day he will review the conversations he has had in terms of both skillfulness and values. He creates a checklist for himself that includes such questions as "How effectively did I listen? How clearly did I get my points across? How respectful and collaborative was I? How did I handle sensitive conversations such as those with colleagues and clients who had been turned off by my interpersonal style?" Time and schedules willing, he will meet with his peer coach once a week and with Elena once a month.

### ACTION: "HOW DO I GET RESULTS?" HELPING CLIENTS IMPLEMENT THEIR PLANS

All three stages of the helping model sit on the "action" arrow, indicating that clients need to act in their own behalf right from the beginning of the helping process. Stages I, II, and III are about planning for change, not constructive change itself. Planning is not action. Talking about problems and opportunities, discussing goals, and figuring out strategies for accomplishing goals is just so much "blah, blah, blah" without goal-accomplishing action. There is nothing magic about change; it is hard work. But, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, each stage and step of the process can promote problem-managing and opportunity-developing action at the very beginning.

Carlos, like most clients, runs into a number of obstacles as he tries to implement his plan. His travel schedule keeps conflicting with even the flexible communication skills program in which he has enrolled. Because he finds the program very useful, he decides to use a tutor from the program to bring him up to speed whenever he cannot fit a session into his travel schedule. Although the company is paying for the program, he has to pay the tutor out of his own pocket. But it's worth it. He also finds that he is not very consistent in using the skills he is learning in the "lab of life." His progress is much slower than he thought it would be. Sometimes he loses heart. He often fails to do the evening self-evaluation sessions. Getting together with his peer coach proves to be almost impossible. And, while he is doing better with clients, he doesn't see much "repair" going on in his relationships with his colleagues. So in one of his discussions with Elena, he reviews the ups and downs of his program and discusses his discouragement with how slowly some of his disenchanting colleagues are warming up to him.



Following his discussion with Elena, Carlos decides to reset the program. First, he agrees to see her for a half hour every other week. This provides him with an incentive to keep to the program. He wants to give her a good report. Second, he discusses his "bad attitude." Even though she said that the whole program would be a lot of work, he didn't realize just how much work. He finds that he can't do the program well without changing some basic attitudes and habits. It's not just a skills program. It cuts much deeper. He has to recommit himself to a more fundamental attitudinal change. New attitudes look fine on paper, but developing them is another story. So Carlos moves on—two small steps forward and a half step backward. He resets his schedule so he can get together with his peer coach. His sessions with both Elena and his peer coach help, and he does make progress.

Figure 2-2 presents the full model in all its stages and steps and their relationship to the action arrow. It includes two-way arrows between both stages and steps to suggest the kind of flexibility needed to make the process work.

### "HOW ARE WE DOING?" ONGOING EVALUATION OF THE HELPING PROCESS

In the light of the "Does helping help?" discussion in Chapter 1, how do helpers using the problem-management and opportunity-development framework evaluate what is happening with each client? By making each case a "mini-experiment" in

itself. Psychological research has a long history of creating what are called N=1 designs, both to evaluate practice and to conduct research (Blampied, 2000; Hilliard, 1993; Lundervold & Belwood, 2000; Persons, 1991; Valsiner, 1986). What's the value of knowing that helping "works" in general if we do not know that it is working in this case?

In many helping models, evaluation is presented as the last step in the model. However, if evaluation occurs only at the end, it is too late. As Mash and Hunsley (1993) noted, early detection of what is going wrong in the helping process can prevent failure. They claimed that an early-detection framework should be theory based, ongoing, practical, and sensitive to whatever new perspectives might emerge from the helping process. The problem-management and opportunity-development model outlined in this chapter fills the bill. It is a tool to check progress throughout the helping process. As we shall see, it provides criteria for helper effectiveness, for client participation, and for assessing outcomes. In later chapters, questions designed to help with the evaluation process will be provided for each step.

Elena, knowing that helpers and clients need to collaborate in this ongoing evaluation process, works with Carlos in using the helping model as the evaluation framework. Carlos comes to appreciate Elena's skill in using the model. Once Carlos takes ongoing evaluation seriously, he begins to make progress. He gets feedback from the self-evaluation process that he begins to use more frequently, from the observations of his peer coach, and from his sessions with Elena. The ultimate feedback comes from goal accomplishment. In what ways and to what degree is he becoming a more competent communicator? How effectively is he repairing relationships with clients and colleagues? To what degree is he shedding his self-centered approach to relationships that contributes to his "others are out to get me" attitude?

### FLEXIBILITY IN USING THE MODEL

There are many reasons why you need to use the helping model flexibly. The main one is this: Helping is for the client. Clients' needs take precedence over any model. That said, a number of points about flexibility need to be made.

First, clients start and proceed differently. Any stage or step of the helping process can be the entry point. For instance, Client A might start with something that he tried to do to solve a problem but that did not work: "I threatened to quit if they didn't give me a leave of absence, but it backfired. They told me to leave." The starting point is a failed strategy. Client B might start with what she believes she wants but does not have: "I need a boyfriend who will take me as I am. Joe keeps trying to redo me." Stage II is her entry point. Client C might start with the roots of his problem situation: "I don't think I've ever gotten over being abused by my uncle." Stage I is his entry point. Client D might announce that she really has no problems but is still vaguely dissatisfied with her life: "I don't know. Everyone tells me I've got a great life, but something's missing." The implication here is that she has not been seizing the kind of opportunities that could make her happy. Opportunity rather than problem is her starting point.

Second, clients engage in each stage and step of the model differently. Consider clients' stories, for example. Some clients spill out their stories all at once. Others "leak" bits and pieces of their stories throughout the helping process. Still others

tell only those parts that put them in a good light. Most clients talk about problems rather than opportunities. Because clients do not always present all their problems at once in neat packages, it is impossible to work through Stage I completely before moving on to Stages II and III and launching into action. It is not even advisable to do so. Some clients don't understand their problems until they begin talking about what they want but don't have. Some clients need to engage in some kind of remedial action before they can adequately define the problem situation; that is, action sometimes precedes understanding. If some supposedly problem-solving action is not successful, then the counselor helps the client learn from it and return to the tasks of clarifying the problem or opportunity and then setting some realistic goals. Take the case of Woody.

Woody, a sophomore in college, came to the student counseling services with a variety of interpersonal and somatic complaints. He felt attracted to a number of women on campus but did very little to become involved with them. After exploring this issue briefly, he said to the counselor, "Well, I just have to go out and do it." Two months later he returned and said that his experiment had been a disaster. He had gone out with a few women, but the chemistry never seemed right. Then he did meet someone he liked quite a bit. They went out a couple of times, but the third time he called, she said that she didn't want to see him anymore. When he asked why, she muttered vaguely about his being too preoccupied with himself and ended the conversation. He felt so miserable he returned to the counseling center. He and the counselor took another look at his social life. This time, however, he had some experiences to probe. He wanted to explore this "chemistry thing" and his reaction to being described as "too preoccupied with himself."

Woody put into practice Weick's (1979) dictum that chaotic action is sometimes preferable to orderly inactivity. Once he acted, he learned a few things about himself. Some of these learnings proved to be painful, but he now had a better chance of examining his interpersonal style much more concretely.

Third, since the stages and steps of the model intermingle, helpers will often find themselves moving back and forth in the model. Often two or more steps or even two stages of the process merge into one another. For instance, clients can name parts of a problem situation, set goals, and develop strategies to achieve them in the same session. New and more substantial concerns arise while goals are being set, and the process moves back to an earlier, exploratory stage. Helping is seldom a linear event. One client, in discussing a troubled relationship with a friend, said something like this:

Every time I try to be nice to her, she throws it back in my face. So who says being more considerate is the answer? Maybe my problem is that I'm a wimp, not the self-centered jerk she makes me out to be. Maybe I'm being a wimp with you and you're letting me do it. Maybe it's time for me to start looking out for my own interests—you know, my own agenda—rather than trying to make myself fit into everyone else's plans. I need to take a closer look at the person I want to be in my relationships with others.

In these few sentences the client mentions a failed action strategy, questions a previously set goal, hints at a new problem, suggests a difficulty with the helping relationship itself, offers, at least generically, a different approach to managing his problem, and recasts the problem as an opportunity to develop a more solid interpersonal style. Your challenge is to make sense of clients' entry points and guide them through whatever stage or step will help them move toward problem-managing and opportunity-developing action.

Flexibility, of course, is not mere randomness or chaos. Focus and direction in helping are also essential. Letting clients wander around in the morass of problem situations under the guise of flexibility leads nowhere. The structure of the helping model is the very foundation for flexibility; it is the underlying "system" that keeps helping from being a set of random events. A helping model is like a map that informs you, at any given moment, "where you are" with a client and what kinds of interventions would be most useful. In the map metaphor, the stages and steps of the model are orientation devices. At its best, it is a *shared* map that helps clients participate more fully in the helping process. They, too, need to know where they are going.

### BRIEF THERAPY AND A HOLOGRAM APPROACH TO HELPING

How long does therapy take? That's like asking, How long is a piece of string? It depends. I have known people who were in therapy most of their lives. Others need only one session to reset some area of their lives. Over the past decade, there has been growing interest in "brief therapies" or what Nick and Janet Cummings (2000) call "time-sensitive psychotherapies."

There is a growing body of evidence that time-sensitive psychotherapies are effective with a large number of patients, perhaps as many as 85% of all those seen in the usual practice (Austad, 1996; Budman & Steenbarger, 1997; Cummings, Pallak, & Cummings, 1996; Hoyt, 1995b), but it is not advocated that all psychotherapy be brief psychotherapy. Even I. P. Miller (1996b), an outspoken critic of short-term therapy, begrudgingly concedes that there is a place for time-sensitive psychotherapies and that psychotherapists of the future must be trained in both short-term and long-term interventions to know when to use one or the other. (p. 44)

They advocate "clinically determined" therapy rather than therapy determined by the economic needs of either clinicians or managed-care enterprises. Effective and efficient helping (Cummings, Budman, & Thomas, 1998) rather than the length of helping should remain center stage.

Although the whole helping process can take days, weeks, months, or even years, it can also take place, literally, within minutes. Consider the following scenario:

Lara, a social worker in a tough urban neighborhood, gets a call from a local minister who says that a teenager who fears for his life because of neighborhood gang activity needs to see someone. She sees the boy, listens to his concerns, feels his anxiety. While the minister thought that the boy was under some immediate threat, Lara realizes that his anxiety stems from a recent shooting that had nothing to do with him directly. She talks with him to get some idea what his daily comings and goings are like. It is soon clear that he is not the kind of person who courts trouble. She then talks him through the kinds of prudent things he needs to do to avoid trouble "in a neighborhood like ours" and in their dialogue points out that he is already doing most of those things. She gently challenges his false perception that the recent shooting somehow involved him directly. All of this helps allay his fears. But he discovers there are a couple of things he needs to do differently like having "good" friends and not letting himself be a lone target on the streets. She also points out that he is more likely to be hit by lightning than a stray bullet. The boy calms down as he begins to realize that in many ways his life is in his own hands.



Lara listens to the boy's immediate concerns and elicits from him a picture of what his daily life in the community looks like (Stage I). Realizing that he needs some relief from his anxiety (Stage II), she "talks him down." Through their dialogue, the boy learns some things he can do to ensure his safety (Stage III). Lara helps him dispel a couple of blind spots—that is, that he is an immediate target of gang activity and that he is in imminent danger of being hit by a stray bullet. So even if you have only one meeting with a client, it would be a mistake to assume that only Stage I things could happen. Preston, Varzos, and Liebert (2000) have written a manual for clients who are in or are considering going into brief therapy.

Helping can be "lean and mean" and still be fully human. A colleague of mine experimented, quite successfully, with shortening the counseling "hour." He arrived at the point where he would begin a session by saying, "We have five minutes together. Let's see what we can get done." He was very respectful, and it was amazing how much he and his clients could get done in a short time. It is true that the helping industry, driven by politics and the financial dynamics of managed care, is focusing more and more on results-oriented, brief psychotherapy. But even if that were not the case, helpers would still owe their clients value for money. Helping that achieves only partial results may, at times, be the best that we can do.

Helpers would do well to develop a "whole process" mentality about helping. Any part of any stage or step can be invoked at any time in any session if it proves beneficial for the client. Think of the helping process as a hologram—that laser-generated three-dimensional image that seems to float in space. In a hologram, the whole is found in each of its parts. The helping model is more like a hologram than a tool kit. It works best when the whole is found in each of its parts. The hologram is at the center of effective brief therapy.

### PROBLEM MANAGEMENT AND CULTURE: A HUMAN UNIVERSAL

Given the diversity of clients, helping models should be vehicles of personal growth, not cultural domination (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of client diversity). The advantage of problem-management and opportunity-development models of helping is that they are easily recognized across the world. Problem solving seems to be what McCrae and Costa (1997) call a "human universal." Many years ago, before presenting an earlier version of the helping process outlined in this book to some 300 college students and faculty members in Tanzania, I said, "All I can do is present to you the helping process I teach and use. You have to decide whether it makes sense in your own culture." After the presentation, the audience made two comments: First, the communication skills used in the helping process would have to be modified somewhat to fit their culture. Second, the problem-management helping process itself was very useful.

Since then, this scene has been repeated—in conferences and training events I and others have presented—over and over again on every continent. The model presented here spells out, in a flexible, step-by-step fashion, the way human beings think about constructive change. The reason this process crosses cultures so easily is that its logic is embedded in human consciousness. People don't really need to learn the framework of the model because, in essence, they already know it. It is, to

use Orlinsky and Howard's (1987) term, a "generic" model of helping. Of course, the process as outlined in these pages together with the skills and techniques that make it work still has to be adapted both to different cultural settings and to different individuals within those settings. This demands cultural sensitivity on the part of helpers.

### USING THE MODEL AS A "BROWSER": THE SEARCH FOR BEST PRACTICE

The claim in this book is that problem management and opportunity development comprise one of the principal processes—perhaps the principal process—underlying all successful counseling and psychotherapy. What are novice helpers to do in the face of the bewildering array of models and methods available to them? Even though there is only a handful of "major brands" of psychotherapy (see Capuzzi & Gross, 1999; Corey, 1996; Gilliland & James, 1997; Prochaska & Norcross, 1998; Sharf, 1999; Wachtel & Messer, 1997), choices must be made.

Eclecticism. Many experienced helpers, even when they choose one specific school or approach to helping, often borrow methods and techniques from other approaches. Other helpers, without declaring allegiance to any particular school, stitch together their own approaches to helping. This borrowing and stitching is called *eclecticism* (Jensen, Bergin, & Greaves, 1990; Lazarus, Beutler, & Norcross, 1992; Prochaska & Norcross, 1998). In one study, some 40% of helpers said that eclecticism was their primary approach to helping (Milan, Montgomery, & Rogers, 1994). Effective eclecticism, however, must be more than a random borrowing of ideas and techniques from here and there. There must be some integrating framework to give coherence to the entire process; that is, to be effective, eclecticism must be systematic.

Problem management as underlying process. When any school, model, or eclectic mixture is successful, it is because it helps clients (1) identify and explore problem situations and missed opportunities, (2) determine what they need and want, (3) discover ways of getting what they need and want, and (4) translate what they learn into problem-managing action. That is, the problem-management and opportunity-development process outlined here underlies or is embedded in all approaches to helping, since all approaches deal with constructive client change. Therefore, the helping model described in these pages, together with the basic skills and techniques that make it work, is a very useful starting point for novices, no matter what school or approach or eclectic system they may ultimately choose or devise.

The "browser" approach. The helping model in this book can also be used as a tool—a "browser," to use an Internet term—for mining, organizing, and evaluating concepts and techniques that work for clients, no matter what their origin.

- Mining. First, helpers can use the problem-management model to mine any given school or approach, "digging out" whatever is useful without having to accept everything that is offered. The stages and steps of the model serve as tools for identifying methods and techniques that will serve the needs of clients.

- **Organizing.** Second, since the problem-management model is organized by stages and steps, it can be used to organize the methods and techniques that have been mined from the rich literature on helping. For instance, a number of contemporary therapies have elaborated excellent techniques for helping clients identify blind spots and develop new perspectives on the problem situations they face. As we shall see, these techniques can be organized in Step I-B, the "turning blind spots into new perspectives" step of the problem-management model.

- **Evaluating.** Since the problem-management model is pragmatic and focuses on outcomes of helping, it can be used to evaluate the vast number of helping techniques that are constantly being devised. The model enables helpers to ask in what way a technique or method contributes to the "bottom line," that is, to outcomes that serve the needs of clients.

The problem-management and opportunity-development model can serve these functions because it is an open-systems model, not a closed school. Although it takes a stand on how counselors can help their clients, it is open to being corroborated, complemented, and challenged by any other approach, model, or school of helping. The needs of clients, not the egos of model builders, must remain central to the helping process. Our clients deserve "best practice," whatever its source.

### UNDERSTANDING AND DEALING WITH THE SHADOW SIDE OF HELPING MODELS

Besides the broad shadow-side themes mentioned in Chapter 1, there are a number of shadow-side pitfalls in the use of any helping model.

**No model.** Some helpers "wing it." They have no consistent, integrated model that has a track record of benefitting clients. Professional training programs often offer a wide variety of approaches to helping drawn from the "major brands" on offer. If helpers-to-be leave such programs knowing a great deal about different approaches but lacking an integrated approach for themselves, then they need to develop one quickly.

**Fads.** The helping professions are not immune to fads. A fad is an insight or a technique that would have some merit were it to be integrated into some overriding model or framework of helping. Instead it is marketed on its own as the central, if not the only meaningful, intervention needed. A fad need not be something new; it can be the "rediscovery" of a truth or a technique that has not found its proper place in the helping tool kit. Helpers become enamored of these ideas and techniques for a while and then abandon them. There will always be "hot topics" in helping. Note them and integrate them into a comprehensive approach to your clients. Many new approaches to helping make outrageous claims. Don't ignore them, but take the claims with a grain of salt and test the approach.

**Rigid applications of helping models.** Some helpers buy into a model early on and then ignore subsequent challenges or alterations to the model. They stop being learners. The "purity" of the model becomes more important than the needs of clients. Other helpers, especially beginners, apply a useful helping model too

rigidly. They drag clients in a linear way through the model even though that is not what clients need. All of this adds up to excessive control. Effective models effectively used are liberating rather than controlling.

**Virtuosity.** Another pitfall that some helpers fall into is becoming a virtuoso, specializing in certain techniques and skills—exploring the past, assessment, goal setting, probing, challenging, and the like. Helpers who specialize not only run the risk of ignoring client needs but also often are not very effective even in their chosen specialties. For example, the counselor whose specialty is challenging clients is often an ineffective challenger. The reason is obvious: Challenge must be based on understanding. Challenge is just part of the picture, part of the hologram.

The antidote to these shadow-side tendencies is simple: Helpers need to become radically client centered. Client-centered helping means that the needs of the client, not the models and methods of the helper, constitute the starting point and guide for helping. Therefore, flexibility is essential. In the end, helping is about solutions, results, outcomes, and impact rather than process. The values that drive client-centered helping are reviewed in Chapter 3.