

The Gerard Egan 3-Phase Skilled Helper Model



Article Written by-Kain Ramsey

Gerard Egan published his work 'The Skilled Helper' in 1975. He drew on an eclectic mix of counseling theories to create a pragmatic, three-stage model of counseling for helping practitioners of any kind. In it, he set out to enable people to, 'manage their problems in living more effectively and develop unused opportunities more fully' and also to 'help people become better at helping themselves in their everyday lives'.

Gerard Egan wasn't setting out to develop theories of the mind or personality development; he was very much concerned with setting out a very practical framework for helpers that could effectively move people forward. To this end he does draw on Carkhuff's theory of high-level functioning helpers, which describes qualities in a helper that prove most effective in effecting change:

- Empathy** - see things from the client's perspective.
- Respect** - maintain respect for the client in a caring manner that maintains the clients' ownership.
- Congruence or Genuineness** - the Rogerian state of congruence in the relationship, authenticity.
- Concreteness** - from abstractions to specifics.
- Self-disclosure** - using appropriate levels of self-disclosure to aid rapport and empathy.
- Confrontation** - to be able to challenge inconsistency in the client when it arises.
- Immediacy** - ability to discuss what is going on at that moment.

Egan also draws on Albert Strong's theory of "Social Influence", which describes the way in which the behavior of one person will influence another, either on purpose or unintentionally as a result of the way the changed person perceives themselves in relation to that person, other people and society. So in the therapeutic relationship, the client's perception of the qualities of the helper is critical.

Another theory key to Egan's work is Albert Bandura's learning theory. This is sometimes seen as a connecting theory between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories as it includes attention, memory and motivation. In essence, it describes how people learn from each other through a process of observation, imitation and modeling.

Following the Skilled Helper model requires a commitment to encouraging and enabling the client to become self-directed, active interpreters of the all that they experience. In this way they seek the meaning in all their actions, situations, relationships, they develop an attitude that is willing to face and overcome challenges, explores problems, seeks opportunities and sets goals. The successful helper will guide their client in initiating their positive strategies and behaviors, and they do this through building a positive, caring and collaborative relationship with the client.

Key to building this relationship is the skills of the helper, and most particularly in their communication skills, and not confined to the verbal, but also their non-verbal communications skills. To this end Egan developed a model of 'active listening' which is encapsulated in the acronym SOLER:

S (Square): Face the client squarely; demonstrating you are involved.

O (Open): Maintain an open posture: Don't cross arms and legs. Open poses are welcoming and engaging.

L (Lean): Leaning forward when a person is talking to you, shows you are listening to them and involved with the meaning.

E (Eye Contact): Eye contact shows engagement and full attention.

R (Relax): Have you tried speaking to someone who's fidgeting? It is highly off-putting and communicates a lack of mental presence. Stay relaxed for the client.

Following these habits will not only put the client at ease but will maximize the possibility of fully understanding the meaning of what the client is trying to communicate, which in turn will allow great empathy. Whilst sympathy does not require significant listening skills, empathy does. The active listener will be cross-referencing the verbal message with the non-verbal message, always on the lookout for clues as to hidden or evasive meanings, or perhaps discrepancies in what the client is telling you. It will aid rapport and help build the most effective therapeutic relationship.

Where Egan's model diverges from the humanistic approach is in challenging those discrepancies when they arise, and a good rapport will be necessary to do that well and without generating negative feeling.

The Gerard Egan Three-Phase Process:

This is a fluid model of exploration, not a strict framework and therefore elements of each stage can appear in all of the others.

The Exploration Phase

We can characterize this Phase with the question, “what is going on?” as the helper is exploring the client’s situation. It is a time in which to build a collaborative counseling relationship and help the client to investigate their situation and uncover the issues that they want to tackle. It is a time to help identify and elucidate problems and opportunities as well as determining the resources available to them.

To achieve success in this phase, the helper will be using excellent active listening skills, developing their rapport, reflecting, paraphrasing, silence, checking their understanding, asking open questions and summarizing what they are hearing.

Some open questions:

- “How do you feel about that?”
- “What were you thinking?”
- “What is it like for you?”
- “What else can you say about that?”
- “Do you want to say more about that?”

The Challenge Phase

The client can resist or fail to see things clearly, and therefore the therapist can help them to explore new perspectives and new possibilities, ensuring that they are realistic and in tune with their values. The helper is trying to facilitate a much more in-depth and objective understanding of their circumstances. We explore the client’s options and possible goals.

The helper is guiding the client toward a more rational decision-making process, utilizing careful analysis, careful consideration of the data and beginning to plan. It can be useful to brainstorm, encourage creative thinking around the issues, in order to generate different options when it comes to dealing with certain situations and arriving at goals.

The sorts of skills the helper can bring to bear will be awareness and use of: challenging, exploring perspectives, implications, what’s not being said, ownership, patterns and connections, 'shoulds' and 'oughts' as well as negative internal criticism.

To help with this using these kinds of questions can be productive:

- “What do you think the situation looks like from their point of view?”.
- “What would she say about all of this?”

- “Are there any other ways of looking at this?”
- Challenge can also be useful;
- “You’re telling me that you never see your wife, but you’ve described activities with her regularly in the past week, is it really correct that you’re not seeing her?”
- “Is there anything you’ve overlooked?”
- “What about all of this is a problem for you?”

The Planning Phase

By this stage, we have a good grasp of the pertinent issues, what it is the client needs to deal with, and it is time to plan appropriate action by defining goals. This can involve changing habits, or modifying patterns of relating. The helper will be guiding the client through problem-solving and decision-making methods, employing appropriate encouragement and support. The client needs to be able to cope with their current problems, and they also need to learn new skills. Any action planned at this phase will be based on the thorough exploration and understanding gained in the first two stages.

As with any creative process, when devising potential strategies, ideas can proliferate, and topics can start to become less clear as an array of solutions are suggested. The helper will help maintain focus and guide selection of action plans that are viable for the client, which meet their needs, match their aspirations and resources available. It is no use deciding on a plan that involves world travel and expensive spas if the client is in financial difficulties!

The aim is to enable the client in moving from their current situation into the one that they would prefer. Everyone has different capacity for change, and while some love big changes, others will require small baby steps. Creating realistic and achievable goals with time specific objectives can help in this process, which along with the encouragement and support of the helper can lead to profound change.

The helper can bring many skills to bear in this stage, including; divergent thinking, goal setting, decision making, problem-solving, evaluation, creative thinking, encouraging creative thinking, knowledge of behavioral change, learning skills.

Some useful questions for this Phase:

- “What would you ideally want instead?”
- “What would you be feeling/doing/thinking if...?”
- “What might you have that you don’t now?”
- “How would life change if this happened?”
- “What possibilities open up if you do this?”

When encouraging creative thinking and creative solutions, the helper needs to help the client break free from their usual restraints and lose their self-consciousness. We need to promote free thinking without any judgment initially so that anything goes. Later as we whittle

down the options, we can encourage the client to exercise rational judgment in what might work and what might not.

To read more about the Egan model, it is worth borrowing or buying a copy of his book, which will go into much more detail.

References:

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