

Marriage Guidance Counselling

KATHLEEN BAKER, Tutor and Counsellor, National Marriage Guidance Council

The Marriage Guidance Council sets out, as the first of its objectives states: 'To provide a confidential counselling service for people who have difficulties or anxieties in their marriages or in other personal relationships.' It offers other services too: education for young people, setting up training courses and conferences, and publishing and distributing literature. But the counselling of individuals and couples is the main activity of the Council and the one for which it is generally known.

The British Association for Counselling defines the counsellor's task as 'to give the client an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways of living more resourcefully and towards greater well being.' Marriage Guidance counsellors offer their clients an hour, in privacy and in confidence, usually at weekly intervals and for as long as necessary to engage in this process. The length of time a counsellor will work with a client can vary from a single interview to over a year; a fairly usual time is three months.

Counsellors do not necessarily aim to save marriages—that is a decision for the client—and indeed sometimes it is counselling that enables a couple to separate. They do, however, endeavour to help clients use the crisis that has brought them to seek help as a point of growth. Partners come for counselling, each blaming the other for what is wrong with their marriage and wanting the other to change. Instead of joining in apportioning blame the counsellor will encourage each of them to look at themselves and their own feelings and behaviour.

In the course of counselling, clients come to understand how these feelings and behaviour have their origin in early experience. They become aware of how these patterns are perpetuated, and of the possibility of changing them. Once behaviour which has seemed inexplicable or even malicious on the part of a spouse is seen as grounded in emotional needs and drives, the partners can start to work together on the marriage.

They learn to accept themselves and each other as fallible human beings and give up infantile expectations that all their needs will be met. They begin to see the other's point of view and—often the thing they value most of all—they learn to communicate with each other in such a way that they can in the future deal with their differences constructively.

During the process of counselling, clients learn that it is they who must solve their own problems. They come to realize that they are responsible for their own lives and to take up what John Rowan describes as 'the most productive stance in therapy; the stance which says "I create my world".' A client who has reached this point has grown in autonomy and maturity in a way that will stand them in good stead, well beyond the crisis which has brought them to counselling.

The main tool of the counsellor is the relationship with the client. Carl Rogers defined the qualities necessary for a therapeutic relationship as genuineness, empathy and unconditional acceptance: these are the foundation of the counsellor's approach to the client. Essentially, counsellors respect and trust their clients and believe in their capacity to know what they need to do and to learn from their mistakes.

Counsellors often use the relationship between themselves and the client as some of the material with which to work. They make use of the fact that negative feelings derived from past experience will at first be transferred onto the counsellor. As the clients work through this and come to see what is the reality of the counsellor, they become aware of what are their characteristic ways of relating to others, and are able to modify them. Positive attitudes acquired during the process of counselling will be taken back into relationships outside the counselling room. Marriage Guidance counsellors will also sometimes use task-setting or techniques taken from Art Therapy or Gestalt to facilitate the process of change.

As its title suggests, the Marriage Guidance Council specializes in marital therapy. It uses the psychodynamic theory of marital interaction originally described by H. V. Dicks and developed by workers at the Institute of Marital Studies. In essence this theory says that at an unconscious level we choose as a partner someone on whom fits our inner world, onto whom we can project those parts that were repressed or split off as a result of early experience. The two halves do indeed make a whole, and the relationship thus offers the possibility of reintegrating the projected parts and growing towards wholeness. It could be said that we choose whom we marry in the hope of healing ourselves. In some cases this works and the marriage is creative and identity confirming for both partners. But with some couples this does not happen; instead the splitting becomes even more polarized and the personalities impoverished. When couples who have got stuck this way come for help it is the task of the counsellor to help the partners recognize and own as theirs, these projected qualities. So that, for example, in the common case of a couple in which the man has done all the 'thinking' and the woman all the 'feeling', the man would be helped to get in touch with the emotional side of himself and the woman with her rationality.

Over the last decade the Marriage Guidance Council has developed and offered a specialist service of sex therapy. This work is done by counsellors who have had at least two years' experience of 'remedial' counselling and have then received additional training which includes acquiring skills and a reassessment of their own sexual attitudes by means of films and discussion groups. The pattern of work is modelled on the structured behavioural pro-

gramme devised by Masters and Johnson but has been modified in various ways. The therapy takes place over a period of about three months with the clients seeing the therapist weekly and doing their exercises in their own home. Further, although the behavioural model is followed in terms of the exercise programme, counselling skills come into play when clients reach a block, so that the current model is closer to that written about by Kaplan.

Marriage Guidance offers its counselling service nationwide (though spread rather thinly in places) through a network of 140 autonomous Marriage Guidance Councils, which range in size from ones which have only two or three counsellors to ones with over fifty. All of these Councils are federated to the National Marriage Guidance Council which carries the responsibility for the selection, training and supervision of counsellors and so ensures consistency in standards of work. Most counsellors see clients on the premises of their local council, but an increasing number work in centres such as GPs' surgeries, general and psychiatric hospitals and penal institutions.

The counsellors are largely voluntary workers who are required to spend at least three hours a week face to face with clients as well as finding time for paperwork and case-work supervision. Increasingly, there is payment for extra hours on a sessional basis and in Salford a salaried counselling scheme exists. Each counsellor who comes into the agency must first be sponsored by their local Council. They then go forward to a day-long selection process with three selectors, which involves both individual interviews and work in groups.

The basic counsellor training takes two years and includes six 48-hour sessions of residential training, constant in-service supervision and regular attendance at discussion groups at which counsellors present cases with which they are having difficulty. The training and supervision are undertaken by tutors who are selected from experienced counsellors who then have further training in supervision. At present, counsellors start work with clients after their first session of residential training. The pattern of training has recently been under review and a modified model will come into operation in 1985. In this model there will be two sessions of training before a new counsellor meets their first clients.

Marriage Guidance clients come from a cross section of social groupings. A survey in 1982 showed a close correspondence between Marriage Guidance clients and the population as a whole. In 1982/3, 39 per cent of the interviews given were with wives on their own, 18 per cent with husbands on their own and 33 per cent with married couples, the remainder with single people. Although counsellors usually try to see spouses together, this is not

essential. It is possible to effect considerable change in a marriage without the second partner being seen. Most first appointments are made by telephone or letter, though occasionally if there is a vacancy a client will be seen on a walk-in basis.

Clients are usually self-referred but some come via Citizen's Advice Bureaux, GPs, solicitors or psychiatrists. A number come on the recommendation of friends or relatives who have themselves been clients.

The demand for the services of Marriage Guidance is high and in many areas clients have to wait for some time, maybe several weeks, before they can be seen. Some councils now operate a system of Reception Interviews so that clients can be seen at least once fairly soon after they apply.

The interest in, availability of, and demand for counselling of all kinds is growing all the time. People now have higher expectations of relationships and women particularly have less need to stay in bad marriages for financial or social reasons. These changes of attitudes and expectations have led to what is sometimes seen as breakdown in old patterns of marriage and family life. Change, whether at a personal level or in society, is uncomfortable and can sometimes seem destructive. But it can also be creative. As long ago as 1967, H. V. Dicks asked, in his book *Marital Tensions*: 'What is the possible evolutionary meaning of the widespread malaise in our society's marital and family life?' He went on to say that he regarded it as 'a manifestation of the pain and maladaptation inseparable from growth.' As Marriage Counsellors work to help the partners within a marriage towards maturity, perhaps they are also helping in the transition towards a more mature society.

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Dr José Jancar

The Nominations and Awards Committee of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency has presented Dr J. Jancar, Consultant

Psychiatrist, Stoke Park Hospital, Bristol, with an IASSMD Award on the basis of his distinguished achievement in the field of scientific literature.