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## EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING

# PRACTICE: CONCEPTS, STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

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## Abstract

*Emotional status of the professional counsellors and clients are veritable tool for counselling outcomes. Emotions of the counsellor and clients are deeply involved in counselling session hence, they are vital components of counselling interaction and intervention. The display of the right type of emotions plays a significant and multifaceted role in the attainment of counselling objectives. Emotions drive counsellors and client's actions and inactions. High emotional intelligence of the counsellor has the tendency and capacity to facilitate positive counselling outcomes. Lack of competency in counselling practice has been associated with unacceptably low emotional intelligence. Therefore, understanding the interconnectivity between emotional intelligence and counselling practice is highly imperative in counselling relationship between counsellor and clients. Literature on emotional intelligence and counselling profession in this part of the world is very limited in number. Adequate information on issues associated with emotional intelligence and counselling will be needed in order to improve counselling service delivery in Africa. This paper, therefore, sheds light on the interconnectivity between emotional intelligence (EI) and counselling practice with particular reference to meaning of counselling and counsellor, personality traits of counsellors and discusses the concept of emotional intelligence, historical development of EI, components and levels of EI. The paper further examines importance of EI in counselling practice, counselling skills for EI and concludes with challenges and remedies associated with the employment of EI in counselling practice.*

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence, emotional suppression, counselling, counsellor, client,

## Introduction

Human beings by nature are emotional beings. Statharakos, Alvares, Papadopoulou and Anastasia Statharakou (2022) assert that emotions are an essential part of human existence. Consequently, emotional expression cannot be downplayed in human beings engagements. Similarly, relationship between counsellors and clients, by nature, is emotionally inclined. Goleman (1995); Bar-On and Parker (2000); Bernes (2003) submit that emotions play a pronounced role in life endeavours and could facilitate expected change in clients' behaviour. As a result of the complex role of emotions in counselling practice, Md Nor et al, (2024) say that counselling profession is often considered emotionally demanding for professional counsellors.

Emotion typically involves feeling, according to American Psychological Association (2018a) but

differs from feeling in that it has an overt or implicit engagement with the world.

The word emotion has its origin from the French word *emouvoir* and Latin word *emovere* which in English Language translation means to “stir up” and to “move out” respectively. American Psychological Association (2018a) defines emotion as “a complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioural, and physiological elements, by which an individual attempts to deal with a personally significant matter or event”.

Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined “emotions as organized responses, crossing the boundaries of many psychological subsystems, including the physiological, cognitive, motivational, and experiential systems.” Rossingol (2022) traced the very long history of emotions to genetically inherited emotional neural circuits that were developed throughout the lives of 50,000 human generations which still remain the same despite 10,000 years of rapid rise of civilization. Emotions, as rightly pointed out by Boyd (2022), were often dismissed as volatile, irrelevant, and irrational to clinical practice in the early development of modern Western psychology and medicine but in recent decades the advent of neuroscience now recognized emotions as fundamental to human experience and they play a central role in information processing, decision-making, and interaction with the world.

In counselling practice, emotions of both the counsellor are deeply involved. Emotion is not only the ‘silent’ driver of counselling relationship between the counsellor and the client but also influences the outcomes and effectiveness of counselling. The part of emotion in counselling practice makes it sometimes emotional demanding or sapping. The counsellor and the client will need to build strong and effective emotions for counselling objectives to be realized. Faisal et al., (2022) assert that in building effective emotions, emotional intelligence plays a crucial role. Emotional intelligence is revolutionizing professional counselling practice to meet emotional needs of clients.

Emotional intelligence is a valuable skill because practicing it fosters interpersonal contacts between conversational partners as well as upsurges self-awareness for the individual, which may lead to improved decision making (Australian Institute of Professional Counsellors, 2023). Conversational partners in the context of this paper are counsellors and their client. This paper, therefore, sheds light on the interconnectivity between emotional intelligence (EI) and counselling practice with particular reference to meaning of counselling and counsellor, personality traits of counsellors and discusses the concept of emotional intelligence, historical development of EI, components and levels of EI. The paper further examines importance of EI in counselling practice, counselling skills for EI and concludes with challenges and remedies associated with the employment of EI in counselling practice.

## **What is Counselling?**

Counselling is therapeutic. The counsellors and clients have to be involved in interactive sessions to resolve issues confronting the latter. No wonder then that counselling is referred to as a form of 'talk therapy'. Counselling as a profession is more than talking. It has been established that defining the term "counselling" is difficult. Definitional difficulties associated with the term 'counselling' are not only from the perspectives of laymen but also among professionals in the field. Aldridge (2014) confirms this assertion when he posits that *counsellors themselves can find it difficult to say what counselling is, but find it easier to describe what they do*. In this same vein Sheppard (n.d):

"Those of us who work as professional counsellors are confident that we know what counselling is and when given an opportunity we are ready and eager to tell others what we do. However, when challenged to provide a crisp, comprehensive, and boundary-setting definition of counselling, we often falter".

Gesinde (2024) classified counselling definitions from various sources into two. Some dictionaries are generally-inclined because they provided meanings not only for counselling but other terms and concepts from other fields of study. On the other hand, there are Counselling-inclined or Specialized Dictionary of Counselling specifically arranged to give meanings to counselling terms only. For instance, 286 pages of the Dictionary of Counselling (2nd ed.) by Feltham and Dryden (2004) make available over one thousand concise definitions of diverse counselling terms.

Apart from these, there are professional definitions from scholars in the field of counselling and professional association definition of counselling. Finally, there is consensus definition of counselling. A unified definition of the term 'counselling' did not come into existence until March 2010 when American Counselling Association Conference took place in Pittsburgh (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014).. It was at this conference that 29 major counselling organizations endorsed a consensus definition of counselling to be:

"Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals"

## **Who is a Counsellor?**

Brown (2011) affirms that Carl Rogers used the term 'counsellor' in the Journal of Consulting Psychology and this represents the first documented reference to a 'counsellor' as a professional adviser different from other professionals like lawyers, diplomats and royal aides. Counselling is a professional service delivery in which a counsellor empowers the client to achieve set goals in life. A counsellor, therefore, is a trained individual who specializes in counselling counselees. He/she is saddled with meeting the counselling needs of clients on an individual or group basis as the case may be. The trained counsellor in question has certain personality characteristics and skills some of which are briefly described below:

### **Personality Characteristics of a Counsellor**

These personality characteristics are desirable traits that will make counselling relationships with clients result-oriented. Some of these tested qualities of a counsellor include above average intelligence, objectivity, sense of humour, emphatic understanding, congruent, non-judgmental attitude, sociable, flexible, tolerance Gesinde (2024) and emotional stability which is the ability to remain calm or even keel when faced with pressure or stress

### **The Concept of Emotional Intelligence**

*Emotional Intelligence (EI) otherwise known as Emotional Quotient (EQ)* has generated an all-encompassing interest by laymen, scholars, professionals, entrepreneurs, etc. and it has received diverse definitions as evident from the following definitions:

1. We define emotional intelligence as the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).
2. Emotional Intelligence is a type of intelligence that involves the ability to process emotional information and use it in reasoning and other cognitive activities (American Psychological Association, 2018b).
3. EI is best described as a way of thinking that enables people to perceive their own emotions, understand the emotional states of others, and behave appropriately in response (Cherry, 2022).
4. EI, refers to the ability to recognise, understand, and manage emotions and influence emotional responses in oneself and others (Lang, 2024).
5. Emotional intelligence also reflects an ability to use intelligence, empathy, and emotions to enhance understanding of interpersonal dynamics (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008)

### **Symptoms of Emotional Intelligence**

Emotionally intelligent persons according to Drigas and Papoutsis (2018) have the following features:

Emotionally intelligent persons have abilities to:

- i. identify how they and others are feeling, ability to
- ii. manage emotions in real time, accept change,
- iii. let go of mistakes and forgive others,
- iv. be aware of their emotional strengths and weaknesses, and
- v. be curious about self and others.

On the other hand, the following are the manifest symptoms of low intelligence in a person:

- ◆ Negative behaviour toward people's ideas or communication

- ◆ Difficulties in interpreting, understanding, and acting on emotions
- ◆ difficulties in expressing personal emotions and feel uncomfortable when other displays emotions
- ◆ Difficulties in feeling empathy and showing love for others
- ◆ Manifestation of low self-esteem and poor self-confidence

### **Brief Historical Development of Emotional Intelligence**

Abraham Maslow was recognized as the first scholar to have used a concept (emotional strength) similar to the concept of emotional intelligence in 1950s. He was of the view that emotional strength could be built to control emotions.

The first appearance of the concept of emotional intelligence was in the doctoral thesis (A study of emotion: Developing emotional intelligence) of Wayne Payne in 1985. Payne clearly made it clear in the abstract of the thesis that "This dissertation introduces the concept of emotional intelligence". Prior to 1985, Leuner was credited to have published a journal article on emotional intelligence and emancipation in 1966. Keith Beasley was ascribed to have used the concept of emotional quotient in his article published in one of the British magazines (British Mensa) in 1987.

In 1990, Mayer and Salovey published a journal article titled emotional intelligence. The publication of a best-selling book: Emotional Intelligence in - Why it can matter more than IQ- by Daniel Goleman in 1996 increased the popularity of the term emotional intelligence. Other books written by Goleman include:

Emotional Intelligence (1995)

The Emotionally Intelligent Workshop: How to Select For, Measure, and Improve Emotional Intelligence in Individuals, Groups, and Organizations (Carry Chermiss & Daniel Coleman

Working with Emotional Intelligence (2009)

The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights (2011)

What Makes a Leader (Harvard Business Review Classics) (2017)

The emotionally Intelligent Leader (2019)

### **Components of Emotional Intelligence**

In order to measure emotional intelligence Daniel Goleman developed a model from where he identified what could be referred to as five pillars or components of emotional intelligence namely: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These components work together and can be learned to build trust, achieve goals, and fortify communication and interpersonal relations. A brief on each of the components is provided below:

**Self-awareness:** This is recognized to be the bedrock on which the model lies. In the context of emotional intelligence, self-awareness is the conscious knowledge of one's emotion in terms of its

strengths and weaknesses and its influence on other people. The conscious knowledge of one's emotion will also include identification of emotional triggers and influence of one's emotion on behaviour or performance.

**Self-regulation:** This is the act of regulating one's emotion. It involves management of emotion through self-regulatory procedures without external intervention. It also focuses on the redirection of negative or disruptive emotions.

**Motivation:** This is all about directing one's emotion towards profitable goals. It also encompasses a desire to drive emotions in pursuit of personal values. The component of motivation is driven by intrinsic factors rather than extrinsic factors. One is intrinsically motivated to set healthy and measurable goals and attain such goals without external support, approval or reward.

**Empathy:** Unlike self-awareness empathy involves understanding and relating with other people emotions. It is all about putting oneself in the emotional shoes of others with a view to sharing in their feelings, perspectives and build deeper emotional connections. It is assumed that if you are in their shoes you will be in a better position to explain reasons for their actions and inactions.

Figure 1 below establishes the interrelationship among the pillars of emotional intelligence:

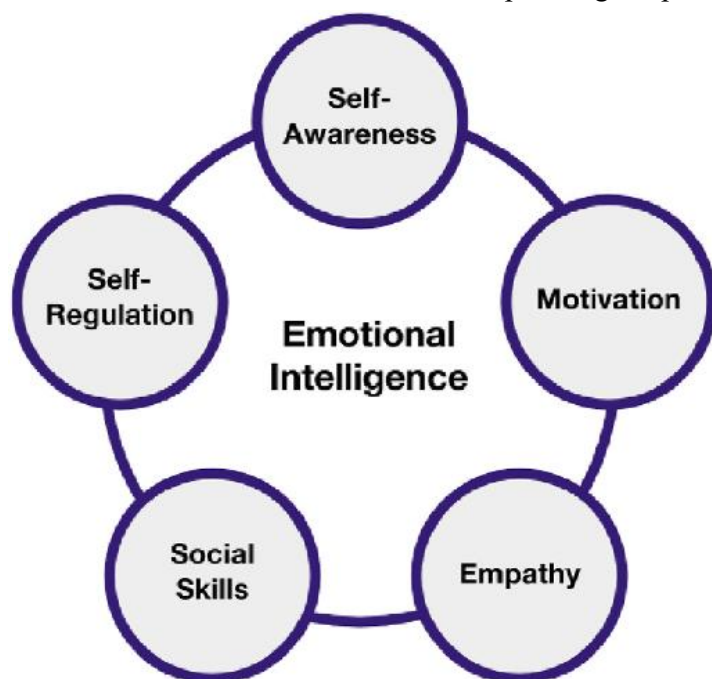
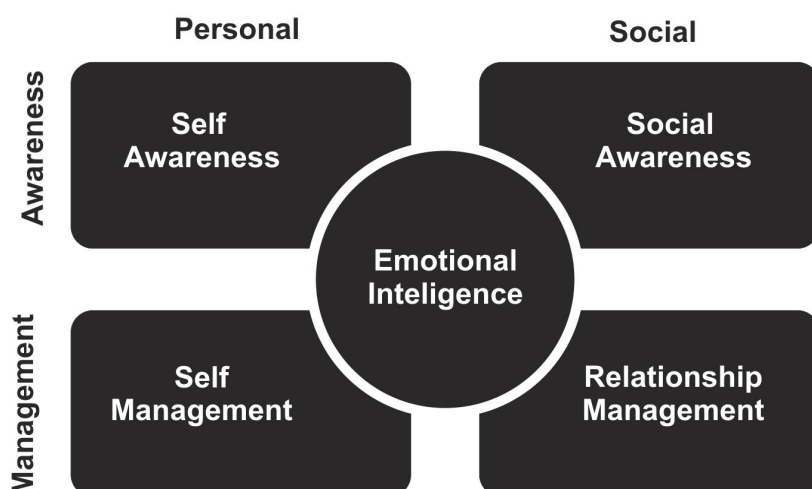


Figure 1: Concept of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995).

In 2000, Goleman expanded the four components of emotional intelligence further grouped

management as depicted in Figure 2 below:



**Figure 2: Expansion of 4 components of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2000)**

These components are further grouped into four domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

### **Levels of Emotional Intelligence**

Salovey and Mayer (1990) listed four levels or steps of emotional intelligence development. It starts with emotional perception and ends with emotional management as explain below:

**Perceiving Emotions:** This is the first step which focuses on the acknowledgement of the fact that emotional responses are real and could be measure accurately. It involves recognizing or/discerning and interpreting emotions from self and others. It is expected that this will cover nonverbal behaviours or cues such as facial expressions, body language, and vocalics.

**Reasoning with emotions:** This is the second step which primary focus is using emotion to enhance thinking or cognitive processes. In other words, emotional experience is used to promote cognitive engagements, think out solution to problems or make decision.

**Understanding emotions:** This is the third step where it is expected that meaning is ascribed to every emotional state. This is imperative because similar emotional expressions may convey a wide diversity of meanings or interpretations. Complex emotions must be comprehended with their underlying causes, long and short terms implications.

**Managing emotions:** This is the final step and it involves the effective regulation of one's emotion and those of others. The adoption of skills learned in steps one to three will be necessary in this last step. Emotional self-control skills, problem-solving skills, and conflict resolution strategies are additional skills for managing one's emotions and that of others in this final lap.

### **Importance of Emotional Intelligence in Professional Counselling Practice**

The following authors have identified specific areas where emotional intelligence importance in counselling cannot be underestimated:

1. Emotional intelligence is the clincher for effective counselling determining how therapists interact with clients and shaping the treatment process (Saxena, 2021).
2. Emotional intelligence guide counsellors' emotional responses, strengthens counsellors' capability to relate with clients, and facilitate real change ((Hilts, Liu and Luke, 2022).
3. High degree of emotion makes a counsellor to be attuned to clients' unconscious emotional changes which will enable the counsellor to be non-judgmental (Saxema, 2021).
4. Emotional intelligence enables a counsellor to manage emotion in a way that their emotions, biases, and reactions do not interfere with the therapeutic processes (Paulraj, Alaboudi, Mali, Alawad, Alqahtani, Vetrayan, 2021).

### **Counselling Skills for Emotional Intelligence**

The personality traits of the counsellor only could not be adequate enough to bring about a positive revolution in the behaviour of the client. Accordingly, the counsellor is expected to exhibit several counselling skills in addition to the personality features underscored above.

- 1) **Attending Behaviour.** Attending behavior is the act of providing unbroken attention to the client. It has been recognized to be the first basic counselling skill. Ivey, Packard, and Ivey (2018) see basic attending skills as the foundation of emphatic relationships and problem-solving. Attending behaviour will not only validate the fact that counsellors are listening but will also encourage the client to talk more freely (Ivey, Packard & Ivey, 2018). The "Three V's" and "B" through which attending behaviour can be realized, according to Ivey and Ivey (2003), are Visual/eye connection, Vocal Qualities, Verbal Tracking and Body Language. Gestures and facial expressions could also be used to create emphatic relationships with the client.
- 2) **Active Listening:** Active listening is an ultimate expectation in a multiplicity of disciplines such as counselling, psychiatry, psychology, and other forms of health care (Ricks & Brannon, 2023). Four diverse contexts of listening within the counselling sessions have been identified by Nelson-Jones (2014). These are counsellor listens to the therapist, client listens to the counsellor, counsellor listens to themselves, and client listens to themselves. To be active is to be energetically involved in something. Active listening in counselling context is not an ordinary listening exercise but sensitive listening. It is the intense efforts of the counsellor to pay close attention to client's verbal and nonverbal communication. Nelson-Jones (2014) sees active listening as something that is more than hearing someone's words but full attunement to views and feelings of the speaker. American Psychological Association (2018) identifies active listening as psychotherapeutic technique that will

enable therapist listens to a client closely and generate questions for the client so as to have full understanding of the message content and the deepness of the client's emotion. Several intentional actions must be carried out if a counsellor is to demonstrate the skill of active listening for the purpose of emotional intelligence development. These, according to Rogers and Farson (1987) will include listening for total message, responding to feelings and noting all cues.

- i) **Listen for Total Meaning:** The counsellor will need to understand the total meaning of the message. Message from the client has two components of the content of the message and the feeling or attitude underlying the content. These two components make the message meaningful.
- ii) **Respond to Feelings:** The counsellor will need to act on both the content and feeling of the message but it has been observed that in some cases the content is far less significant than the feeling. If the full flavour of a message is to be fully understood feeling component must be adequately responded to.
- iii) **Note All Cues.** The counsellor will need to understand the fact that means of communication is not only limited to verbal communication. There is nonverbal cue of communication which can be revealed via: the way in which a speaker hesitates in his speech or stress certain points loudly and clearly, inflection of voice (changes in pitch and tone), mumbling of words (speaking quietly and unclearly),
  - facial expressions,
  - body posture,
  - hand movements,
  - eye movements, and
  - breathing.

From the above it is clear that active listening is more than listening to speaker's words but a psychotherapeutic technique designed to pave way for proper diagnosis of psychological or emotional problems. It will also be helpful to know that certain behaviours or actions are not active listening. Miller and Rollnick (2013) listed such actions to include analyzing, blaming, commanding, distracting and humoring. Others are judging, lecturing, probing, shaming, and warning.

- 3) **Reflection of Feelings:** This is otherwise known as reflection response. The counsellor repeats or rephrases the client's last declaration and stresses the state of feeling (affective). Feelings in emotional tones are sometimes implicitly communicated by clients. It is the professional responsibility of the counsellor to isolate them for illumination through the reflection of feelings. When appropriately used, it will label the emotion (feeling) that is embedded in clients' communication. Kypridemos (2014) asserts that reflection of feeling is

advantageous in counselling because:

- a) It can upsurge the counsellor's understanding of the clients.
- b) It can help clients clarify their thoughts.
- c) It can reassure clients that the counsellor is willing to help.

## **The Therapeutic Approach to Boosting Emotional Intelligence**

### **Journaling Therapy**

Journaling therapy also known as writing therapy is a form therapy in which the client is expected to purposefully expresses his/her internal frame of reference in writing articulating emotions, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions. Sohal, Singh, Dhillon, and Gill (2022) identified two major forms of journaling therapy. These are expressive writing and gratitude journaling.

The expressive writing exercise will give room for emotional self-examination that will further create self-awareness and emotional clarity. Self-awareness of one's emotions will generate empathy for others. Self-awareness and empathy are critical components of emotional intelligence. Pennebaker (1997) declares that expressive writing tend to improve mental and physical health. He developed an expressive writing protocol that will enable people provide information in writing their traumatic experience for over four days consecutively for 15-20minutes per session.

### **Role-playing**

Psychologically, role playing is a therapeutic method where clients are expected to act out or behaviourally rehearse certain scenarios. This will enable them understand their emotional state and that of others. It will also increase self-awareness and enable them develop empathy which are basic ingredients for emotional intelligence.

## **Challenges Associated with Emotional Intelligence in Counselling Practice**

### **1. Counsellors' Training and the Development of Emotional Intelligence in Nigeria**

Professional training is critical in counselling practice. Would-be-counsellors are to obtain a minimum of first degree in any recognized universities in Nigeria in guidance and counselling/ counselling psychology before formal practice. In some cases, higher degrees may be required. Development of high level of emotional intelligence is a must for result-oriented counselling practice. Consequently, the curricular of the training programme for counselling degree ought to include elaborate study and practice in emotional intelligence. From what is obtainable from the CCMAS for guidance and counselling programme one may find it difficult to pinpoint to any elaborate study or practicum on the development of high level emotional intelligence.

This challenge of elaborate training on emotional intelligence his not limited to Nigeria, in Australia TrainSmart (2024) reports that traditional academic curricula for counselling sessions focus more on theoretical knowledge and technical skills and excluded emotional intelligence

skills. Some may want to argue that the more you practice as a counsellor the more you develop high emotional intelligence. Yes, it is possible but a well packaged training programme on emotional intelligence in school will be preferable than waiting for learning on the job. As rightly observed by Sirega (2025) attainment of emotional intelligence is not easy and does not appear suddenly an individual will need to be trained for it at an early age. Lang (2024) equally posits that counselling curriculum should incorporate emotional intelligence dedicated courses and modules with particular focus on theoretical foundations and emotional intelligence applications in therapeutic settings.

## **2. Emotional Suppression**

Suppression of emotion is one other challenge associated with employment of emotional intelligence in counselling practice. Emotional intelligence and suppression have intertwined relationship. Emotional suppression or inhibition is the act of consciously preventing outward expression of emotions. Chapman et al. (2013) describe it as the intentional holding back of authentic emotional experiences and expression. Elsig (2022) says it happens when uncomfortable thoughts and feelings are pushed out of mind. Pain, fear, contempt, anger, unhappiness, disappointment, disgust, frustration, etc. are examples of emotions that could be suppressed. Husain (2022) affirms that emotional inhibition reduces emotional experience and harmful for mental health. Emotional suppression is dangerous to the development of emotional intelligence because it will present fake or shadow emotions from either the clients or the counsellor. Shadow emotions will not give room for appropriate self-awareness that kick-start the transition to high emotional intelligence. The challenge of suppressing emotions is typically common among men in Africa. Men, are traditionally trained and expected hold in their negative emotions from public glare. Menachem (2025) confirmed this assertion when he observed that: early in life many boys receive information not to welcome certain emotions such don't cry, man up or be strong. According to him such words appear to be harmless but with time they form foundation of emotional suppression which is affecting countless men globally.

It, therefore, behoves on counsellors to employ emotion-focused therapy techniques that will lead to the manifestation of real and not shadow emotions of clients.

## **Conclusion**

Emotional intelligence skills are highly indispensable in therapeutic process for both the counsellors and clients. Counsellors in particular will need it for effective counselling outcomes. Professional counsellors that cannot manage his/her emotions before and during therapy will not be able to demonstrate necessary emphatic understanding that will meet the emotional needs of the client.

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