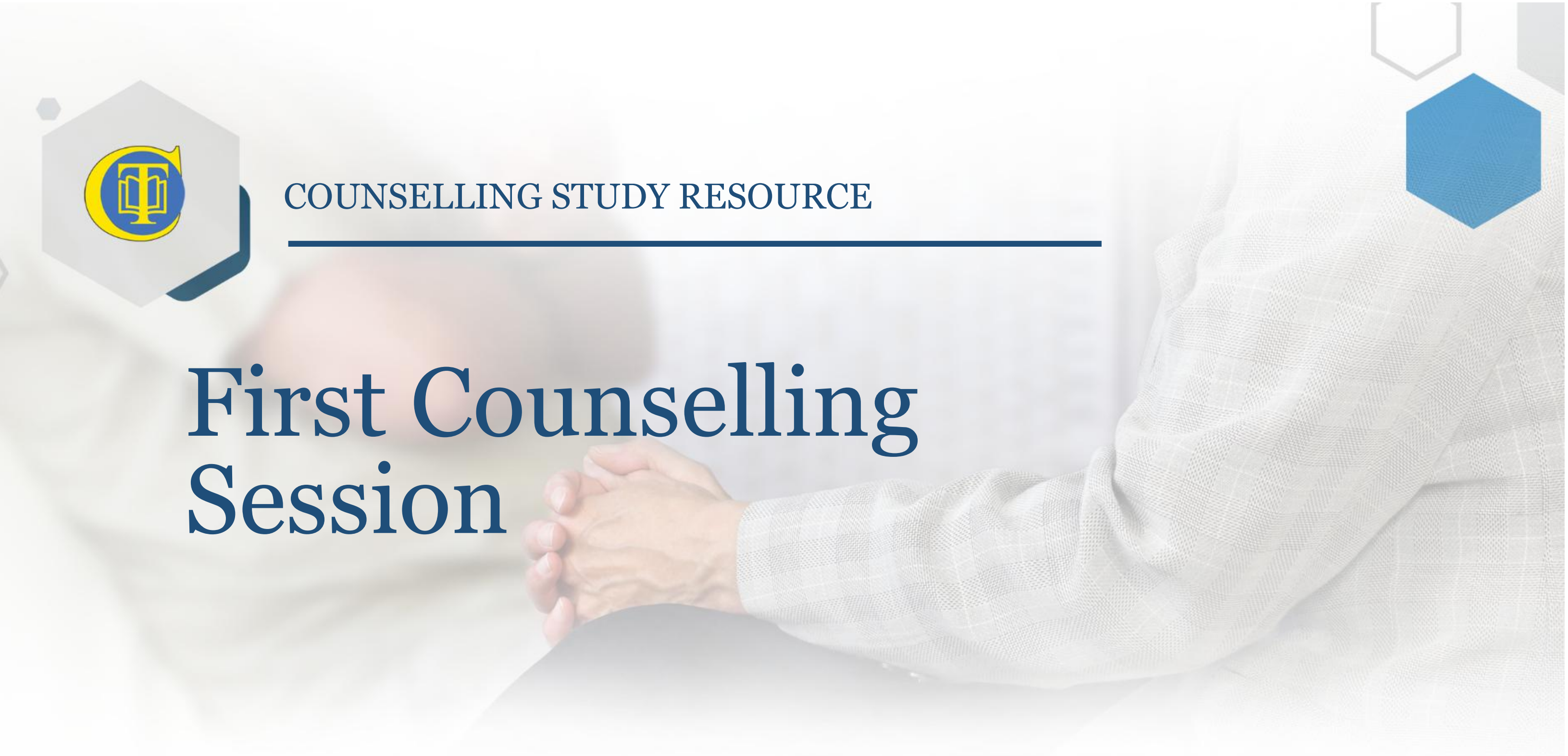

First Counselling Session

The first counselling session is different from any subsequent sessions. In the first session, you will put a counselling contract in place, discuss boundaries and the limitations of confidentiality. It also gives you as the counsellor an opportunity to assess the client's needs as they explain their reasons for seeking counselling.

Opening and Closing a Counselling Session

'Topping and tailing' a counselling session is an important skill. It is assessed as part of the advanced skills assignment of trainee counsellors on Level 4 diplomas in the UK. A big focus is how all your counselling skills are used, but a lot of the marks are given to how you start and end your session. This can be challenging as questions like "what do I need to say, and how do I do so in a way that is respectful to the client?"

Did you know that this resource is available in the Counselling Study Resource with links to related topics for further reading? Read it online.

What Is 'Topping' a Session?

It's a working agreement – an introduction – where we contract for what's going to happen in this session and how. It's important not to rush it – so it might take up to ten minutes of a 30-minute skills session.

The working agreement empowers the client, giving them choices within the counselling relationship. Checking the client's understanding as we go, we need to explain:

- what's on offer
- our modality of counselling (e.g. person-centred)
- limitations in confidentiality (dependent on the country and legislation there)
- health and safety
- non-maleficence (see the BACP *Ethical Framework*)
- time boundaries

A counselling contract will usually cover the following areas:

- Time and day(s) of session(s)
- Duration of the session (usually 50 minutes)
- How many sessions are available
- What approach the counsellor uses (click here to find out more about this)
- Fee (if a paid service)
- How long your notes will be kept for, who can see them, and how they will be disposed of
- Complaints procedure
- Confidentiality

As a client, you would expect a counsellor to offer confidentiality. However, there are exceptions to confidentiality.

Exceptions to confidentiality are disclosures such as:

- Harm to self and/or to others (this is usually the policy of organisations that employ counsellors)
- Money laundering
- Acts of terrorism
- Drug trafficking
- Child protection issues (which the counsellor has a legal obligation to disclose*)

A good practice is to ask how the client would like you to respond if, for instance, you bumped into them in the street and they were with their family. It might be that your client wants you to ignore them so that they don't have to answer awkward questions, such as 'Who was that?'

Finally, when you agree on the contact – which, as a guide, takes about 10 minutes – then the work begins. The client explains their issues and together you try to make sense of them and maybe come to a resolution.

What is 'Tailing' a Session?

About five or ten minutes before the end of the session, it's important to let the client know that the time is coming to an end, so they have time to 'pack up'. It allows them to 'change gear' and gives you, as the practitioner, the chance to close everything up before they leave, making sure they're safe to 're-enter the world'.

* Refers to UK legislation; other countries will vary.