

UNIT SEVEN

Counselling support for vulnerable learners

Tool 25: What kind of counselling service can your school offer?

In Unit 7 we examined two options for school-based counselling support (see Guide page 162 Unit 7). The two options are illustrated by the two case studies which both provide wonderful examples of how, despite their challenging circumstances, these two schools have managed to develop workable strategies for offering counselling services to support vulnerable learners in their schools.

Drawing on the two options presented in the guide, this tool is intended to help you think about and plan a feasible strategy for implementing a counseling support service at your school context.

Purpose

- To conduct a situational analysis or assessment that will help you to understand the size of the challenge and the current capacity of your school to set up a counselling service.
- To assist you to decide on the most suitable options for implementing counselling support in your school context.

What to do

1. Call a meeting of your SMT and invite the School Based Support Team (SBST) to participate as well.
2. Use the questions provided in the text box on the following page to guide your assessment of your school situation (size of the problem and current capacity to address the problem).
3. Discuss and formulate answers to the questions. Record your answers and use these as the basis for planning the counseling component of your care and support plan which you will develop in Unit 8.



Assess your options
<p>1. Assess “how big the problem is” how many vulnerable learners are there in your school and how many are in need of counseling?</p> <p>Think about the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will these learners be identified? • How can teachers be involved in identifying learners in need of counselling support • How will teachers know what to look out for? • What role will the SBST play? • How will learners be screened for referral? • What system will you use to prioritise those learners that need counselling more urgently than others? • How will confidentiality be ensured? • How will records be kept and how will learners progress tracked? <p>2. Assess the resources, both human and other you already have in your school</p> <p>Think about the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the current counseling skill levels and/or qualifications of teachers at your school to establish your school’s capacity to offer counselling • Do you have any teachers on your staff that have any specialized qualifications in child psychology or counselling? • Do you have any qualified Life Orientation / Life Skills teachers? • Do you have any teachers who have had specialized professional development in counselling, either through the Department of Education or through programmes offered by a reputable NGO? • Does your school have a suitable room that affords the necessary privacy required for counseling? • Do you have a suitable place to keep confidential records? <p>3. Identify what additional resources your school may need to establish a well run counselling service</p> <p>Think about the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the potential of government and non–government organisations in your area to provide counseling and support • Identify and visit clinics, hospitals and South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) offices in your area to establish what kind of support services including counseling services they can offer (illicit details pertaining to nature of services, frequency of this service, cost, will they come to your school or will you have to organize to get learners to their offices, any specific responsibilities that they require of the school etc). • Identify and visit any other non government, church–based or other organizations who work in your area and establish what relevant support services they can offer (be sure to ascertain the terms and conditions under which such services will be supplied) <p>4. Assess your school’s capacity to coordinate and manage a counselling service</p> <p>Think about the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the SMT facilitate the creation of a positive and safe environment for dealing with HIV and AIDS and other socio-economic barriers to learning? • How will a code and culture of ethical behaviour be established in your school? • Does your school have a SBST to coordinate the counseling service? If not, how will you go about establishing a functional SBST? • Is there a senior member of the SMT (principal or deputy) who will take responsibility for overseeing and monitoring the counseling service • Who will be responsible for keeping confidential records pertaining to vulnerable learners? <p>5. Assess the financial implications and the school’s capacity for meeting these financial obligations</p> <p>Think about the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the costs involved in using government and /or non-government counselling services (is there a service fee?) • Will there be transport costs involved in getting learners to particular facilities? • Any other costs involved in offering a counseling service? • How will the school raise the necessary money to meet the costs incurred?

Tool 26: Towards creating a safe and supportive school environment

As we have seen, support is crucial for learners experiencing various psycho-social barriers to learning, if they are to achieve their full potential. However, research has shown that while some children may need special counselling, the broader challenge of psycho-social support for children is not a matter for specialists:

Rather it lies in creating school environments within which children feel safe and supported, rather than excluded and vulnerable.

Therefore for most schools, the challenge is a dual one. How to provide specialist counselling for those learners who need it, but more generally, how to ensure that a caring culture is nurtured and maintained throughout the school. Importantly it needs to be understood that creating a culture of care and support is an ongoing process. Positive daily interaction between teachers and learners is critical to establishing a culture of caring.

Because of their daily interaction with the learners, all teachers need to a certain extent, to be seen as “first level counsellors” (refer to the pastoral role ascribed to teachers as one of the seven roles of educators).

Purpose

- This tool is intended to provide guidelines that help school management think about psycho-social support for learners and the key roles played by teachers in this respect.
- It is also intended, above all, to create a supportive, safe environment in which learners feel free to share their anxieties.

What to do

To provide emotional support to learners, teachers cannot force the issue. They need to be sensitive and patient, and might find that it takes time to win the learner’s trust. Some of the first skills a teacher needs to develop pertain to careful observation and listening skills.

1. It is a good idea for the SMT to workshop the suggested guideline with the teaching staff.
2. Discuss the important pastoral role that each teacher can play.
3. Help teachers to see their contribution to creating a caring school.
4. Discuss when it is necessary to refer learners for specialised counselling
5. Inform all teachers as to what procedures need to be followed when referring learners for specialised counseling (who should be contacted, who at the school is designated to deal with referrals etc).



TOOL

Guidelines for teachers to build up a trusting and safe relationship with learners

Never force a learner to talk. It must always be their choice. Avoid direct, persistent questioning – especially about personal experiences. Make sure that learners know that they only have to say something if they feel comfortable about it. They can choose.

Confidentiality is very important. If you encourage the use of a journal or free writing you must make sure that learners are able to keep what they write confidential. Never tell other teachers or learners or people in the community about things a learner has told you about!

Don't be afraid of tears. Do not be afraid of children crying. Crying is a good way to get feelings out. Just sit quietly and touch the child gently on their arm to let them know you are caring. Let them cry. Give them a tissue and a glass of water. They will soon stop. Then talk quietly about how it is good to cry and let your feelings out and normal to feel very sad when someone has died. If a child cries while in a group or in class you can take them outside and stay with them until they feel better. When you get back into the class don't just ignore the crying and pretend it didn't happen. Say something like, "Thando was feeling very sad. We all feel that way sometimes. It is quite ok to cry when we feel sad. What can we say to make Thando feel better? Slowly move on to a happy topic of discussion or sing a happy song.

Don't give advice. It is not necessary to say things like "it is going to be alright. Don't worry, things will get better." They may not get better and this kind of comment tells the child that they should not really be crying. Don't give advice either. Just listen and show you care with a tissue, a hand to hold and a glass of water.

Refer children who are not able to carry on with normal life because they are too sad. Sometimes, a learner may not be able to function because they are too sad. They cannot cope with schoolwork or become withdrawn or start to behave badly. This is a sign that they are not coping with the grief. This is when you will need to refer them to a social worker or counselor for professional help.