

from: Corey & Corey, *Becoming a Helper*

This material may be protected by  
copyright. (Title 17, U.S. Code) **FOCUS QUESTIONS**

1. What has attracted you to the helping professions? Who in your life has been instrumental in your decision to consider this role for yourself?
2. What is your main motivation for wanting to be a helper?
3. What needs of yours are likely to be met through your work as a helper? To what degree do you think that these needs might either enhance your ability to help others or diminish it?
4. Think of a time when you very much needed help from a significant person in your life or from a counselor. What did you most want from this person? What did he or she do that was either a help or a hindrance to you?
5. Think about the attributes of an effective helper. What are a few traits or characteristics that you would identify as being the most important?
6. What do you consider to be some counterproductive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of helpers? Can you identify three major personal characteristics that are likely to strain the ability of helpers to form effective relationships with those who are seeking their assistance?
7. At this time in your life, how prepared (from a personal standpoint) do you feel you are to enter one of the helping professions? If you were applying to a graduate program or for a job in the field, you might be asked these questions: "What qualities, traits, attitudes, values, and convictions are central to the person who you are?" "How might these personal characteristics be either assets or liabilities for you as you pursue a career in the helping professions?"
8. What kind of education and training program do you think best fits your interests and talents? How do you see this program as a means to attaining your career objectives?
9. If you could pursue a career in one of the helping professions at this time, what would your ideal vision be? What work particularly appeals to you? With what clients would you most like to work? What kind of human-service work would bring you the greatest meaning and satisfaction?

## AIM OF THE CHAPTER

As you consider a career in one of the helping professions, you are probably wondering: "Are the helping professions for me? Do I know enough to help others? Will I be able to apply what I'm learning in my education to my job? Will this career be satisfying in the long run?" This book is intended to help you answer these and other questions about your career. The focus of the book is on *you* and on what you need personally and professionally to be the best helper possible. We also emphasize the realities you are certain to face when you enter the professional world. You will be best able to cope with the demands of the helping professions if you get an idea now of what lies ahead.

We begin in this chapter by inviting you to examine your diverse motives for becoming a helper. We challenge you to clarify what you get from helping others as well as what you are able to give them. Ideally, you will be able to meet your own needs and the needs of your clients through the helping process. We share our own experiences as beginning helpers to demonstrate that learning to become a helper is a process, with its ups and downs. This chapter also introduces you to the attributes of an effective helper. Although we do not think that there is one perfect pattern of characteristics that identifies "ideal" helpers, we do present some attributes as a catalyst to encourage you to think about the characteristics you possess that could either help or hinder you in your work with others. Because most students express concerns about what professional program will best help them attain their career objectives, we explore the differences among various educational routes. We also examine some of the major factors to consider in selecting a career in the helping professions. Although you may think you know the career path you want to pursue, we encourage you to keep your options open while you are reading this book and taking this course. You will probably work in several different positions within a career area, and many human-services professionals change careers at different points in their lives. For instance, they may begin by providing direct services to clients in a community agency and then shift to administering programs.

Finally, keep in mind as you read this book that we use the terms *helper* and *human-services professional* interchangeably to refer to a wide range of practitioners, including social workers, clinical and counseling psychologists, marriage and family therapists, pastoral counselors, community mental-health workers, and rehabilitation counselors.

## EXAMINING YOUR MOTIVES FOR BECOMING A HELPER

In choosing a career in the helping professions, you would do well to begin by examining your motivations for pursuing this path. It is critical that you be honest with yourself about the needs you will satisfy by entering this field. Your motives and needs can work either for or against both you and your future clients. In fact, the same need or motive has the potential to become either a pro-

ductive or a counterproductive force in your helping style. As you reflect on the needs described in this section, ask yourself: "Do I deny having certain needs? How might I be able to satisfy both my own needs and those of the people who seek my help? What needs of mine, if any, might I be inclined to meet at the expense of my clients? Are some of my needs so intense that they cannot be met?"

### *Typical Needs of Helpers*

Below are some motivations that we have observed in our own students and trainees in the helping professions. We encourage our students to recognize their needs, to accept them, and to become aware of how these needs influence the quality of their interactions with others.

*The need to make an impact.* Perhaps you are hoping that you will exert a significant influence on the lives of those whom you touch. Many helpers profess altruistic desires to make the world a better place. Yet it is all too rare that we hear students and trainees admit that they are entering a helping profession because they want to satisfy a diverse range of their own needs. They may want to know that they are important and that they have the power to help people help themselves. Although they recognize that they won't be able to change the world in dramatic ways, they still want to make a dent in some corner of that world. When clients are not interested in changing or don't want their help, however, they sometimes become frustrated. Your entire worth as a person should not be tethered to the need to make an impact on the lives of others.

*The need to return a favor.* The desire to emulate a role model often plays a part in the decision to be a helper. Someone special may have entered your life in a very influential way. This role model may be a teacher or a therapist. Many one-time clients in counseling, for example, decide to become counselors themselves. Or the influential person may be a grandmother, uncle, or parent. Many therapists whom we know have acknowledged that they were greatly influenced by their experience in personal therapy to seek the education needed to become therapists themselves.

*The need to care for others.* You may have been a helper from a very early age. You were the one in your family who attended to the problems and concerns of other family members. Your peers and friends found it easy to come to you to unload their burdens. You heard that you were a "natural helper." Based on these life experiences and some of your early decisions, you sought out training to capitalize on your talent. One of the pitfalls of being a caregiver to significant people in your life has been that no one attended to your needs, and thus you never learned to ask for what you needed. While you were so busy making sure that others were taken care of, you forgot that you, too, needed someone to listen to you and understand your situation. You can easily become personally and professionally burned out, or emotionally exhausted, if you don't learn to ask for help when you need it.

One of the professionals who reviewed the manuscript of this book reported that out of 33 psychologists in the training program at his institute half identified themselves as "rescuers" in alcoholic families. In his view, they were recruited at birth and trained daily to stabilize the family. Many of our own students are adult children of alcoholics who adopted the role of peacemaker in their families. Although this pattern is not necessarily problematic, it is important that such helpers become aware of their dynamics and learn how they operate in both their personal and their professional lives.

If the pattern described here fits you, you may profit from reevaluating your early decision to focus on taking care of others to the exclusion of taking care of yourself. If you burden yourself with the full responsibility of always being available for everyone who might need your help, you are likely to find that you will soon have little left to give.

*The need for self-help.* You may want to go into the helping professions, at least in part, to work on personal issues. For example, you may have experienced the difficulties of growing up in an alcoholic family, and you may still be vulnerable due to your early wounding. In your professional work you are likely to encounter a number of individuals who have struggled with similar concerns. Helpers who specialize in abused children may have been victims of child abuse. Some women who were involved in abusive marriages eventually become counselors who specialize in working with battered women. Your interest in helping others often stems from an interest in dealing with the impact of your own struggles.

The main point is that the motivation for selecting a specialty can be the well-spring of creativity for you. It is not necessarily important that you be "adjusted"; rather, what is useful is to be aware of your own personal issues. As Rollo May has said, healers are most often able to heal others out of their own experience with psychological struggle. It is the wounded healer, not the adjusted helper, who can be authentically present for others searching to find themselves. If you have struggled successfully with a problem, you are able to identify and empathize with clients who come to you with similar concerns.

This motivation could also work against you and your clients. Consider the case of a female counselor who works with women who are the victims of spousal abuse. The counselor may try to work out her own unfinished business and conflicts by giving plenty of advice and pushing these women in certain directions. Because of her unresolved personal problems, she may show hostility to the abusing husband, especially if she becomes overinvolved with family dynamics.

*The need to be needed.* Very few helpers are immune to the need to be needed. The problem arises when you deny that you want to feel needed. It may be psychologically rewarding to you to have clients say that they are getting better because of your influence. These clients are likely to express their appreciation for the hope that you have given them. You may value being able to take care of other people's wants, and you may get a great deal of satisfaction from doing so. To us, satisfying this need is perhaps one of the greatest rewards of being helpers. We hope that you will not be apologetic about having this need and will not deny

that you like being needed and appreciated. If this need is consistently in the forefront, however, it can overshadow the needs of your clients. Some helpers foster dependency by encouraging their clients to call them often. Perhaps they need their clients more than their clients need them.

Wanting to feel appreciated for what you are doing for others can be perfectly all right. The danger exists when you *must* receive appreciation and recognition to feel worthwhile. If you depend exclusively on your clients to feel like a useful human being, your self-worth is on shaky ground. The reality is that many clients will not express appreciation for your efforts. Furthermore, agencies often do not give recognition or positive feedback. Instead, you may get feedback when your performance does not meet with the expected standards. No matter what you accomplish, the institution may expect more of you. Eventually, you may feel that whatever you do will not be enough.

Some helpers love their work because they have so many opportunities to feel needed. In many ways their work becomes their life. The possible danger with relying completely on your work to satisfy your need to feel needed is that your purpose and meaning in life might vanish if you could no longer work.

*The need for money.* Some helpers have come to enjoy the financial rewards of their work. We usually suggest that if students need to make a great deal of money they look elsewhere than the helping professions. In most cases, beginning helpers are not likely to get rich. Many professionals feel that they are not adequately compensated financially for their contributions.

You certainly do not need to feel guilty for wanting to earn a good living. If you were to donate most of your services and had to struggle to make ends meet, you might soon find yourself resenting all that you were giving to your clients. However, financial motives can work against establishment of therapeutic relationships. If you make how much you are earning from each client your primary concern, you are likely to keep clients coming to you when it is no longer in their best interest.

*The need for prestige and status.* You may have hopes of acquiring a certain level of prestige, if not a certain income level. Yet if you work in an agency, many of the consumers of the services you offer will be disadvantaged. You will be working with people on probation, those with various addictions, poor people, and people who are sent to you. Because of this clientele, you will frequently not be given the prestige and the status you deserve. In fact, society may not even respect you. For this reason, it is important that you evaluate status within yourself rather than measuring it by what others give you.

Conversely, you may work in a setting where you can enjoy the status that goes along with being respected by clients and colleagues. If you have worked hard and become good at what you do, allow yourself to accept the prestige you have earned. You can be proud yet still be humble. If you become arrogant as a result of your status, however, you may be perceived as unapproachable, and clients may be put off by your attitude. You become prone to accepting far more credit for your clients' changes than you deserve. Some clients will put you on a pedestal, and you may come to like this position too much. Remember, those on a pedestal have only one place to go—down. If you want your self-esteem to rest

on a solid foundation, it is essential that you look within yourself to meet your status needs rather than looking to others to provide you with affirmations that you are indeed a worthwhile person.

*The need to provide answers.* Many of our students seem to have a strong need to give others advice and to provide the "right answers." For example, some of our students say they feel inadequate if their friends come to them with a problem and they are not able to give them concrete advice. Yet their friends may really need to be listened to and cared for rather than to be told "what they should do." Although you may find satisfaction in influencing others, it is important to realize that your answers may not be best for them. Your purpose is to provide direction and to assist clients in discovering their own course of action. If you find that your need for providing advice and answers sometimes gets in the way of effectively relating to others, we encourage you to tell people that your tendency is to offer answers but that you hope they can look within themselves for a possible answer that will help them.

*The need for control.* Related to the need to provide others with advice and answers is the need to control others. Most of us have some need for self-control and also the need to control others at times. Although some degree of control of our lives is essential for our security and sanity, when we overcontrol, we allow very little spontaneity into our lives. If we are overly attracted to schedules and planning, there is not much room for surprises. Some have a great need to control what others are thinking, feeling, and doing. You might ask yourself these questions: Are you convinced that some people should think more liberally (or more conservatively)? When people are angry, depressed, or anxious, do you sometimes tell them that they should not feel that way and do your best to change their state of mind? Do you at times have a strong need to change the way people who are close to you behave, even if what they are doing does not directly affect you? If you honestly search inside yourself for these answers, you may find that you have a need to control the attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors of friends, family members, and those with whom you work. The more you attempt to control them, the greater the chances are that they will find a variety of ways to resist your control. Although some helpers have a need to control under the guise of being helpful, it can be a productive exercise to reflect on what the outcomes might be if you gave more and more control to those you encountered. After all, is your purpose in helping to control the lives of others, or is it to teach others how to regain effective control of their own lives?

### *How Your Needs and Motivations Operate*

We often say that in the ideal situation, your own needs are met at the same time that you are meeting your clients' needs. Most of the needs and motives we have discussed can work either for or against a client's welfare. There is nothing wrong with most of these needs, nor do they have to get in the way of effective helping. When you are unaware of them, however, there is a much greater likelihood that they will determine the nature of your interventions. If you are attempting to

work through unconscious personal conflicts by focusing on the problems of others, for example, there is more chance that you will use your clients to meet your needs. In addition, you may be in trouble if some of these needs assume such a high priority that you become obsessed with satisfying them. For instance, if your need for control is so high that you consistently attempt to determine the path that others take, this influence could easily interfere with their development of independence and freedom. Helpers who meet their own needs at the expense of their clients are depriving their clients of the quality of care to which they are entitled. If you feel a strong need to provide answers to every problem a client presents, for example, this giving of advice is not so much in the best interest of the client but, rather, is meeting your need for giving answers and advice to others. As you reflect on the needs we have discussed, think about how they might either enhance or interfere with your helping of others. If you have not worked with clients yet, think of situations when you talked with friends or family members who were struggling with some problem. Recall how you related to them as they were searching for the best course of action. Do your best to identify how any of these needs can become problematic if you deny them, become obsessed with them, or meet them at the expense of others.

### *Examine Your Own Motives for Helping*

At this point we encourage you to reflect on your own motivations for considering a career as a helper. Ask yourself these questions, and strive to answer them as honestly as you can: "Have I given much thought to why I'm considering a helping career? How aware am I of my own needs and motivations? Am I able to meet my needs and at the same time meet the needs of those I help? Do I feel guilty or apologetic for having needs? Do I think that the ideal is to be a selfless helper? In my personal life, do I consistently take care of others and put myself second? Can I be genuinely interested in others and still interested in my own growth?"

It is unlikely that any single motive drives you; rather, needs and motivations are intertwined and can change over time. Even though your original motives and needs change, your desire to be a helper may remain unchanged. Because personal growth is an ongoing process, we encourage you to periodically reexamine your motives for being a helper. It can be a valuable tool toward self-awareness.

## *OUR OWN BEGINNINGS AS HELPERS*

This is a personal book in two ways. It is personal in that we encourage you to find ways to apply the book to yourself. In addition, we have written the book in a personal manner, sharing our own views and experiences whenever we think it is appropriate and useful. As a concrete illustration of how personal motives and experiences can affect career choice, we discuss some of our own motivations for becoming helping professionals and remaining in the field.

Beginning a helping career is not always easy and can involve anxiety and uncertainty. Although at this point we feel more confident than when we were

beginning our careers, we have not forgotten our own struggles. We, too, had to cope with many of the fears and self-doubts discussed in the previous pages. By sharing our own difficulties with you, we hope to encourage you not to give up too soon. At this point in our professional lives, we still question why we are doing what we do. We reflect on both what we are giving and what we are getting through our varied work projects.

### *Jerry Corey's Early Experience*

When I was in college studying to become a teacher, I hoped to create a different learning climate for students than I was experiencing as a learner. I wanted to help others, and it was important for me to change the world. I recognize now that the need to make a significant difference has been a theme for the more than 30 years I have been in the helping professions. As a child and as an adolescent, I did not feel that my presence made that much difference. In many ways, during my early years, I felt that I did not fit anywhere and that I was unrecognized and useless. There was a good deal of pain attached to feeling ignored, and one of my early decisions was not to let myself be ignored. This took the form of making myself a nuisance, which of course resulted in negative attention. But I assumed that this type of recognition was better than being ignored! In college I experienced some success and found some positive routes to being recognized. Later, when I began my teaching career, I began to see that I could make a difference, at least within the confines of my classroom. In addition to helping students enjoy learning, I also got personal satisfaction from knowing that I was a useful person, which was quite different from my perception of myself during my youth. In fact, I think that I depended (and still do) to a large extent on my professional accomplishments for my sense of identity.

At the beginning of my career as a counseling psychologist, I did not feel confident, and I often wondered whether I was suited for the field. I recall as being particularly difficult the times that I co-led a group with my supervisor. I felt incompetent and inexperienced next to my co-leader, who was an experienced therapist. Much of the time I didn't know what to say or do. It seemed that there was little place for me to intervene, because my co-leader was so effective. I had many doubts about my ability to say anything meaningful to the members. It just seemed that my supervisor was so insightful and so skillful that I would never attain such a level of professionalism. The effect of working with an experienced group leader was to heighten my own sense of insecurity and inadequacy.

Another thing that I found difficult was practicing individual counseling in a university center. When I began as a practicing counselor, I frequently asked myself what I could do for my clients. I remember progress being very slow, and it seemed that I needed an inordinate amount of immediate and positive feedback. When after several weeks a client was still talking about feeling anxious or depressed, I immediately felt my own incompetence as a helper. I frequently found myself thinking: "How would my supervisor say this? What would he do?" I even caught myself copying his gestures, phrases, and mannerisms. Many times I felt that I did not have what it took to be an effective counselor, and I wondered if I had pursued the wrong path.



I often had no idea of what, if anything, my clients were getting from our sessions. Indications of whether clients were getting better, staying the same, or getting worse were typically very subtle. What I didn't know at the time was that clients need to struggle as a part of finding their own answers. My expectation was that they should feel better quickly, for then I would know that I was surely helping them. I also did not appreciate that clients often begin to feel worse as they give up their defenses and open themselves to their pain. When I saw clients expressing their fear and uncertainty about their future, it only brought out my own lack of certainty that I could help them. Because I was concerned about saying "the wrong thing," I often listened a lot but didn't give too many of my own reactions in return.

Even though it is uncomfortable for me to admit this, I was more inclined to accept clients who were bright, verbal, attractive, and willing to talk about their problems than clients who seemed depressed or unmotivated to change. Those whom I considered "good and cooperative clients" I encouraged to come back. As long as they were talking and working, and preferably letting me know that they were getting somewhere with our sessions, I was quick to schedule other appointments. Those clients who seemed to make very few changes were the ones who increased my own anxiety. Rather than seeing their own part in their progress or lack of it, I typically blamed myself for not knowing enough and not being able to solve their problems. I took full responsibility for what they did during the session. It never occurred to me that the fact that they did not return for another session might have said something about them and their unwillingness to change. I had limited tolerance for uncertainty and for their struggle in finding their own direction. My self-doubts grew when they did not show up for following appointments. I was sure that this was a sign that they were dissatisfied with what they were getting from me.

I particularly remember encouraging depressed clients to make an appointment with one of the other counselors on the staff. I learned in my own supervision that working with depressed clients was difficult for me because of my own reluctance to deal with my own fears of depression. If I allowed myself to really enter the world of these depressed clients, I might get in touch with some of my anxiety. This experience taught me the important lesson that I could not take clients in any direction that I had not been willing to explore in my own life.

Although I am not engaged in counseling people individually, I do teach counselors and write textbooks on counseling practice. Had I not challenged my fears and self-doubts, I am quite certain that I would not be a counselor educator and an author today.

### *Marianne Corey's Early Experience*

I was a helper long before I studied counseling in school. From childhood on I responded to the needs of my brothers and sisters. At age 8 I was made almost totally responsible for my newly born brother. I not only took care of him but also attended to other members of an extended family.

My family owned a restaurant in a German village. The restaurant, which was in our home, was the meeting place for many of the local men. These men came mostly to socialize rather than to eat and drink. For hours they would sit and talk, and I was taught that I had better listen attentively. Furthermore, I learned that I should not repeat the personal conversations and gossip to other townspeople. At this early age I learned three very important skills: attentive listening, empathic understanding, and confidentiality. It became apparent to me that a variety of people found it easy to talk to me and tell me about their personal problems.

In my growing-up years I felt liked and respected by most people. I remember feeling compassion, especially for those who had a difficult or unusual life situation. For example, I recall seeing a woman who had a psychotic episode standing naked by an upstairs window. She threw her clothes and furniture out of the window as onlookers baited her. I felt sad and thought that she must be very unhappy. I also had special feelings for two persons in my village who were considered "town drunks." I was curious about why they wanted to drink.

I have always been interested in looking beyond the facade that people present to others. I became convinced that people could be more than they appeared if they were willing to make an effort to change. My belief was atypical in my culture, which conveyed the message that "this is fate, and there is nothing you can do about it."

In my own life I overcame many obstacles and exceeded my dreams. As a result, I am often successful in challenging and encouraging my clients not to give up too soon when limits are imposed on them. Through my work I derive a great sense of satisfaction when I have been instrumental in the lives of individuals who are willing to take risks, to tolerate uncertainty, to dare to be different, and to live a fuller life because of their choices. When clients show appreciation for what I have done for them, I enjoy hearing it. However, I always let them know that their progress stems only partially from my efforts; the rest comes from their hard work.

In my life now I find it easy to give to my friends, family, and community as well as to clients. It seems natural to me to give both personally and professionally. It continues to be a struggle for me to find a good balance between giving to others and taking for myself. Although I am considered a good giver, I realize that I am a slow learner when it comes to making my needs known and asking for what I want.

It is interesting for me to compare my cultural conditioning and early role in my family with my development as a professional caregiver. Although I seemed to assume the role of caring for my brothers and sisters "naturally," I did not feel quite as natural when I began formal helping. In my first practical experiences as part of my undergraduate program in behavioral sciences, I had my share of self-doubt.

In one of my earlier internships I was placed in a college counseling center. I remember how petrified I was when one day a student came in and asked for an appointment, and my supervisor asked me to counsel this client. The feedback that I received later from my supervisor on how confident I had appeared was very incongruent with what I had felt. Some of the thoughts that I remember

running through my head as I was walking to my office with this client were: "I'm not ready for this. What am I going to do? What if he doesn't talk? What if I don't know how to help him? I wish I could get out of this!" In my self-absorption I never once considered any of my client's feelings. For instance, how might he be approaching this session? What fears might he be having?

I was much more aware of myself than of my clients. I took far too much responsibility, put much pressure on myself to "do it right," and worried a lot about what harm I could do to them. I did not allow my clients to assume their rightful share of the responsibility for making changes. I often worked much harder than they did, and sometimes it seemed that I wanted more for some of my clients than they wanted for themselves. I think I had a tendency to exaggerate my capacity for causing harm because of my fears and insecurities as a helper. When I shared with my supervisor my concern about feeling so responsible for the outcomes of our sessions and about hurting my clients, she responded "You are assuming more power than you have over your clients."

Another time I told my supervisor that I had doubts about being in my profession, that I was overwhelmed by all the pain I saw around me, and that I was concerned that I was not helping anybody. I remember being very emotional and feeling extremely discouraged. My supervisor's smile surprised me. "I would be very concerned about you as a helper," he said, "if you never asked yourself these kinds of questions and were not willing to confront yourself with these feelings." In retrospect, I think he was telling me that he was encouraged for me because I was acknowledging my struggles and was not pretending to be the all-competent counselor who was without fears.

As a beginning counselor I was acutely aware of my own anxieties. Now I am much better able to be present with my clients and to enter their world. Although I am not anxiety-free, I am not watching myself practicing therapy. Furthermore, although I take responsibility for the counseling process, I don't see myself as totally responsible for what goes on in a session, and I am usually not willing to work harder than my clients.

At one time I wanted to abandon the idea of becoming a counselor and instead considered teaching German. I was very aware of comparing myself with professionals who had years of experience, and I thought I should be as effective as they were. What I eventually realized was that my expectations were extremely unrealistic, because I was demanding that I immediately be as skilled as these very experienced people. I had been giving myself no room for learning and for tolerating my rudimentary beginnings.

One of my professional activities now is working with beginning helpers. I find that they are often in the same predicament I was when I began working with others. These students seem focused on how much I know and how easy interventions seem to come to me. By contrast, they feel discouraged with their lack of knowledge and with how much they have to struggle to find "the right thing to say." They usually sigh with relief when I tell them about some of my beginnings and admit that I do not see myself as an expert but as someone who has a certain amount of expertise in counseling. I want most to convey to them that learning never stops and that beginnings are difficult and, at times, discouraging.

## A HELPING CAREER IS NOT FOR EVERYONE

As is clear from our accounts, both of us had self-doubts, and we still doubt ourselves at times. We certainly do not see it as a disgrace if you wonder whether a helping profession is right for you. If you keep the question of whether you want to pursue a helping career open, you are bound to have periods of self-doubt. At times you may feel excited about the prospects of your career choice, and at other times you may feel hopeless and discouraged. Give yourself room for some of these ambivalent feelings. Don't make the decision whether to pursue a helping career by yourself, based on your initial experiences. We encourage you to be open to the pattern of consistent feedback you receive from faculty members, supervisors, and your peers. In some situations you may hear that you are not suited for a particular field. If people have concerns about your entering that helping profession, be willing to listen and to consider what they have to say. Such feedback is certainly hard to accept. Your first inclination may be to decide that the person does not like you, yet the advice may be in your best interest. If you hear such a recommendation, ask for specific reasons for the judgment and find out what alternatives the person can suggest to you.

You will ultimately have to make the decision of whether the helping profession is for you, but before you decide, consult with supervisors, colleagues, friends, and others who know you best. Give yourself credit for being able to change. If you are willing to remain open and apply the effort needed to change, you may find that your limitations can also be your assets.

The temptation to give up too soon is often greatest when you first have to apply what you have learned in your courses. A most difficult time will be when you step out of the lab and into the real world. The chances are that you will find that what worked in the lab will not work so well in real-life helping situations. In the lab you may have worked with fellow students who role-played clients who were cooperative. Now you are facing some clients who, no matter how hard you try, are not responding to you. Realize that it will take time and experience to learn how to apply your knowledge of theories and techniques to actual situations. At first your attempts at helping may seem artificial and rehearsed. You will probably be more aware of this artificiality than your clients. Again, allow yourself the time to gain a greater sense of ease in applying what you have learned and in functioning in your role as a helper.

### *Counterproductive Attitudes*

Up to this point, we have encouraged you to avoid too quickly giving up pursuing one of the helping professions, even though there may be times when you might feel like abandoning this role. However, we also want you to assess your attitudes and personal characteristics to determine which traits may be assets or liabilities in your quest to provide help to others. This section considers some characteristics or attitudes that we see as counterproductive if you want to make a career of helping others. As you take the following self-inventory, strive to be as honest as you can in assessing these traits in yourself. Use the following scale to

respond: 4 = this statement is true of me *most* of the time; 3 = this statement is true of me *much* of the time; 2 = this statement is true of me *some* of the time; and 1 = this statement is true of me *almost none* of the time. Although some of these statements may seem a bit extreme at first reading, do your best to remain open to seeing whether the particular characteristic can be applied to you in any way.

- \_\_\_ 1. I have few problems in my life and therefore am in a position to help others resolve their problems.
- \_\_\_ 2. My way is the right way, and if my clients accepted my values, they would be happy.
- \_\_\_ 3. I have very strong religious convictions, and it is my responsibility to guide others to adopt them.
- \_\_\_ 4. I have no religious affiliation, do not believe in religion, and consider everyone who has religious convictions to be neurotic.
- \_\_\_ 5. My vision of helping is telling clients what they should do. For every question they raise, I should be able to provide a definite answer.
- \_\_\_ 6. I have little tolerance for clients expressing feelings such as sadness, grief, or guilt, because that does little to change their situation and is self-indulgent.
- \_\_\_ 7. My basic belief about humankind is that people are evil, not to be trusted, and in need of being straightened out.
- \_\_\_ 8. I've had a rough life, and if I've "made it," I think others should be able to make it too.
- \_\_\_ 9. At times I am hostile, indirect, and sarcastic.
- \_\_\_ 10. I have made a minimal effort to expose myself to learning situations and have avoided feedback from fellow students, professors, and supervisors as much as possible.
- \_\_\_ 11. The goal of getting a degree or a license is foremost in my mind; the process of getting there was seen as a necessary, but unpleasant, means to an end.
- \_\_\_ 12. I believe that those teaching and supervising me know less than I do.
- \_\_\_ 13. I tend to be intimidating to people and at times seem to enjoy having others be afraid of me.
- \_\_\_ 14. I have a difficult time seeing people in pain; I want to quickly take their pain away and turn them to more pleasant thoughts.
- \_\_\_ 15. Although I sometimes experience pain, I am unwilling to acknowledge this suffering and seek help for it; I think that my pain is being taken care of by attending to the pain of my clients.
- \_\_\_ 16. I consistently make my needs more important than my clients' needs.
- \_\_\_ 17. I need my clients more than they need me, and therefore I foster their dependency on me.
- \_\_\_ 18. I have a difficult time entering a client's world; I tend to perceive reality only through my own eyes.
- \_\_\_ 19. I am chronically depressed when I listen to the sagas of others. I often overidentify with them, and I tend to make their problems my problems.
- \_\_\_ 20. I see counseling as something that others need, yet I can't imagine myself seeking this kind of help.

- \_\_\_ 21. I have a very fragile ego that is easily bruised, and thus I'm overly sensitive to any criticisms from others.
- \_\_\_ 22. I'm easily defensive and have an aversion to being challenged.
- \_\_\_ 23. I have lived a very sheltered life and have a limited and fixed vision of the world.
- \_\_\_ 24. I'm unable to accept those who have values different from mine.
- \_\_\_ 25. I have an intense need to be in control; when I feel that I'm not in control of myself or others, I feel anxious.

Now that you have finished taking this inventory, go over those items that you identified as characteristic of you most or much of the time. We hope that you will not quickly lose heart but will see this as a challenge for making some changes in yourself. For the duration of the semester, it would be a good idea to work on some of these attitudes and traits that you have identified. For instance, if it is difficult for you to listen to others when they are in pain and if you tend to want to cheer them up quickly, you can make a conscious effort to try behaving in different ways the next time someone close to you is experiencing pain. If you become aware of your limited life experience, you can expose yourself to broader experiences. If you discover that you have been assuming that your values are right for everyone else, you can open yourself to recognizing that others fundamentally different from you live productive lives. You can challenge your notion that help is good for others but not for you by getting for yourself what you offer to others. What is absolutely essential is a high degree of honesty and an openness to being challenged.

## ATTRIBUTES OF THE "IDEAL HELPER"

Although it is useful to describe some of the characteristics of the "ideal helper," even the most effective helpers do not meet all of these criteria. If you try to match the ideal picture we are about to paint, you will be needlessly setting yourself up for failure and frustration. But it is surely possible to become a more effective helper if you are aware of those areas that need strengthening. You can hone your existing skills and acquire new ones. You can integrate knowledge that will enhance your abilities. You can make personal changes that will allow you to be more present and powerful as you intervene in the lives of your clients.

### *Portrait of an Effective Helper*

What follows are some characteristics that we consider an integral part of effective helping. With these possibilities in mind, consider the following perspective of the helper who is making a significant difference:

- Ideally, you are committed to an honest assessment of your own strengths and weaknesses. You recognize that who you are as a person is the most important instrument you possess as a helper.

- You realize that you are unable to inspire clients to do in their lives what you are unable or unwilling to do in your own life.
- You are open to learning and have a basic curiosity. You realize what you don't know, and you are willing to take steps to fill the gaps in your knowledge. You recognize that your education is never finished but is something that you are continually acquiring.
- You have the interpersonal skills needed to establish good contact with other people, and you can apply these skills in the helping relationship.
- You genuinely care for the people you help, and this caring is expressed by doing what is in their best interest. You are able to deal with a wide range of your clients' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. You share your persistent reactions to your clients in appropriate and timely ways.
- You realize that it takes hard work to bring about change, and you are willing to stick with clients as they go through this difficult process. You are able to enter the world of your clients and see the world through their eyes rather than imposing your own vision of reality on them. You offer support when it is needed and confront clients on their unused potential when this is required.
- You realize that clients often limit themselves through a restricted imagination of possibilities for their future. You are able to inspire clients to dream and to take the steps necessary to fulfill their dreams in reality. It is often your faith that enables clients who have little hope to begin to believe that they have the potential for a better future.
- You are willing to draw on a number of resources to enable clients to move toward their goals. You are flexible in applying strategies for change, and you are willing to adapt your techniques to the unique situation of each client.
- In working with clients whose ethnic or cultural background is different from yours, you show your respect for them by not fitting them into a neat mold.
- Even though you wrestle with your own problems, this struggle does not intrude on your helping of others. You do not burden clients with long tales about your own personal problems, but you are willing to draw on your life experiences to deepen clients' self-exploration.
- You take care of yourself physically, mentally, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. You do in your own life what you ask of your clients. If you are confronted with problems, you deal with them.
- You question life and engage in critical self-examination of your beliefs and values. You are aware of your needs and motivations, and you make choices that are congruent with your life goals. Your philosophy of life is your own creation, not one that has been imposed on you.
- You are capable of establishing meaningful relationships with at least a few significant people.
- Although you have a healthy sense of self-love and pride, you are not arrogant.

This is not a complete list, and no one fits the portrait of the ideal helper perfectly. Our intent in presenting this list is not to overwhelm you but to provide

you with some characteristics that are worthy of reflection. You might be telling yourself that you lack many of these characteristics. An unskilled helper can become a skilled one, and all of us can become more effective in reaching and touching the lives of the clients we encounter.

### *Assessing Your Personal Characteristics*

In applying to an educational program in the helping professions, you were probably evaluated on both your academic background and your promise for personal and professional development. Most graduate counselor-training programs make use of a formal review at specific points to assess the academic progress of students. At this point we will not discuss the screening out of students who show signs of being impaired. But we do want to challenge you to assess your own personal characteristics that could work either for or against you in your role as a professional helper.

In addressing the question "Are the helping professions for me?" you are encouraged to use this book as a catalyst for honest self-reflection. Below is a list of qualities, traits, attitudes, values, and convictions that one graduate program uses to assess candidates' level of personal development. Assume either that you are applying for admission to such a program or that you are now in a training program that evaluates you on the basis of personal characteristics. As you review the attributes below, reflect on how well you know yourself, and assess your current level of interpersonal functioning.

- *Sensitivity.* How interested are you in others and the personal welfare of others?
- *Personal presence.* How respectful and genuinely involved are you in your interpersonal interactions?
- *Compassion and empathy.* How able are you to respond to the needs of others with concern and understanding?
- *Flexibility and a willingness to receive feedback.* Can you openly consider feedback offered by others and make changes in your attitudes and behavior?
- *Integrity.* How well do you demonstrate self-respect and respect for others in your interactions?
- *Modeling.* Can you model functional human behavior and coping processes?
- *Insight.* What is your capacity for perceiving, understanding, abstracting, and generalizing from professional sources and personal experiences?

Many training programs offer some self-exploration experiences in which students can become more aware of how their personal attributes manifest themselves in relationships. In your practicum and internship seminars, there are typically opportunities to focus on ways in which your personal style influences your ability to establish helping relationships with clients. If your program does not offer formal personal-growth experiences, seek these resources in the community. Much of the rest of this book will deal with the interplay between you as a person and your work as a professional helper. Our underlying assumption is that



the best way to prepare for a dynamic career is to come to a fuller appreciation of the richness of your being and to be able to use your own life experiences in your evolution in the helping professions.

## SELECTING A PROFESSIONAL PROGRAM AND CAREER PATH

Students planning to enter one of the helping professions sometimes fall into the trap of idealizing the profession. In their minds, they may build up the glory of helping others, seeing only the positives. They may envision themselves as being able to help virtually everyone who comes to them, and even reaching those who do not seek their counsel. Although having ideals and goals to strive for is part of being a helper who makes a difference, it is easy to paint an unrealistic picture of what your career as a helper will be like. You need to engage in ongoing reality testing to maintain a balanced outlook. You can test your vision by talking to various practitioners in many different settings. Ask them to tell you what they do in a typical week. Inquire about their motivations for choosing and remaining in the helping professions. Ask especially about the rewards, challenges, and demands of their work.

When you begin fieldwork, you'll be able to test many of your ideas and expectations against the real world of work. This is a good time to reflect on your motives and needs for considering helping as a career. Observations in various field settings and practical experience working with different client populations will provide a more accurate picture of how your career is likely to satisfy your needs for becoming a helper in the first place.

At this point, you may not even be certain you want to pursue a career in the helping professions. If you are enrolled in a two-year community college program in human services, you may be wondering whether it would be best for you to get a job when you complete your program. A wide range of human-services jobs are available, including skills training, social service assistants, work with the mentally handicapped, outreach workers in the community, work with parolees or in prison settings, and a host of community agency settings. Those who graduate with a substance abuse certificate often find jobs in drug and alcohol treatment centers. It is generally true that the higher your educational level the more career options are open to you. However, you may want to get a job for a time to gain experience once you complete a community college program. Later you may see the need to return to school for a bachelor's or a master's degree in one of the helping professions.

Whether you are an undergraduate or a graduate student, you have probably experienced some anxiety in selecting the right program. We encourage students to be open to new ideas. There are no absolute guidelines or perfect choices. Gather program material from several universities and talk with professors and students. Talking with professionals about their work experience can also broaden your perspective. Ask about the specific educational and practical background that they most value. In selecting a program, ask yourself these questions:

"Will the program give me what I need to do the work I want to do? Does the orientation of the program fit with my values? Am I compatible with the program?"

If you are taking an introductory course on the helping professions as an elective and are undecided about pursuing a career in the field, you can take selected courses and fieldwork classes to explore your interest in continuing. We have met students who remained in a course of study even though they had discovered that they were not enthusiastic about the field. They were hesitant to change because doing so could be interpreted as a failure. Others are reluctant to change majors because they would face added requirements for graduation. It seems to us that such students are likely to fail in the long run if they don't pursue their real interests.

If you find yourself in a program that you really don't like, consider getting out. But be sure you evaluate the overall direction of the program rather than a specific course or requirement that you do not like. One of our graduates complained that some of the classes she had to take were unrelated to her career interests. Specifically, she couldn't understand why research-oriented and grant-writing courses were required. However, she discovered that these courses were valuable in helping her land a job. In hindsight, she found value in a part of her education that she at one time had thought was meaningless.

### *Deciding Which Professional Route to Take*

Students often ask which professional specialty we think is best for them. You can take many routes as a helper in the human services. You might ask: "Should I become a social worker? a psychiatric technician? a marriage and family therapist? a mental-health counselor? a psychologist? a paraprofessional worker?" These professional specialties have different focuses, yet all have in common working with people.

We tell students that they will have to choose a specialty through a process of reading and thinking about the alternatives. Much depends on what you want to do, how much time you are willing to invest in a program, where you want to live, and what your other interests are. Realize that there is no "perfect profession" and that each profession has advantages and drawbacks. In the Appendix we list the addresses of major professional organizations from which you can obtain information on the educational and training background needed for the various professions.

At the undergraduate level, human-services programs train practitioners for community-agency work, especially for drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs. Human-services workers generally carry out specific roles and functions under the supervision of clinical social workers, psychologists, and licensed counselors. At the master's degree level, students can choose among four types of programs: counseling, rehabilitation counseling, marriage and family therapy, and clinical social work. At the doctoral level, there are generally four approved programs for those wanting to become practitioners: social work, counselor education, counseling psychology, and clinical psychology. Each specialization has its own perspective and emphasizes different roles and functions for practitioners.

Regardless of which of the helping professions interests you the most, you are likely to discover that you will occupy many different positions within an area of specialization. For instance, if you pursue a clinical-social-work program, you may eventually hold a variety of jobs. You are likely to provide direct service to clients, including case work, counseling, assessment, and community work. You may also assume a role in formulating social policy, doing advocacy work, and writing grants to fund social programs. At some point your professional services may be more indirect, such as supervising interns, working as a consultant, and designing or managing human-services programs. You may begin by doing a great deal of counseling and case work, and at some point you may find management and administration to be challenging. Be open to the vast range of possibilities before you. Do not fall into the trap of convincing yourself that once you accept a position you are locked into the specific job forever. Too often we find that students are overly anxious about making the "right decision," as though there were only one or two positions they would ever occupy. Instead, allow yourself to consider your professional life in a developmental way, whereby you will see new possibilities as you gain additional work experiences.

### *Advantages and Disadvantages of Various Specializations*

We asked some of our colleagues to identify what they tell students who ask about graduate training in their specialty. We were mainly interested in comparing social work with marital and family therapy, because many of our students raise questions pertaining to choosing one of these two graduate programs after they have completed a bachelor's degree in human services. Below are some of the common threads that we received from our informal survey.

*Marital and family counseling.* The specialization of marital and family therapy is primarily concerned with relationship counseling. It deals with assessing and treating clients from a family-systems perspective. Students in a master's program in marital and family therapy take a variety of courses in assessment and treatment, as well as theory courses. They also do extensive supervised fieldwork with children and adults, couples, and families. Several of the instructors in our program, who have training and a license in family counseling, offered the following perspectives on this professional route. Their responses have been paraphrased.

- Having a professional license will open many doors, but the type of license is less important than one's academic courses, life experiences, and internship practice. Most programs in marital and family therapy emphasize clinical applications and involve a great deal of experiential work.
- Marital and family therapy, being in its infancy, is still an emerging field. If a student has a pioneer spirit and is interested in being able to influence the direction of the field, this is certainly a road he or she might consider. People who do well in this field are innovative, are self-directed, and

understand themselves, and they are in basic agreement with the tenets of the systems approach.

- Traditionally, only social workers, as well as psychiatric workers, have worked with the aging, dying, and bereaved, but this situation is changing somewhat. The bottom line when it comes to advice for students is to follow your own interests. I recommend going where your heart is.
- A drawback of marital and family therapy is that there is no nationwide licensure. Some states also do not have a specialized license in this field. In addition, the marital and family therapist license is sometimes not considered as prestigious as other licenses.
- The greatest joy for me is to see children and adolescents I helped 20 years ago come back and see me as a group. At such times, the feeling of having made a contribution is overwhelming. There is a sense of having a place in the lives of families and in the history of our civilization.

**Social work.** This specialization attends not only to the inner workings of a person but also to an understanding of the person in the environment. A master's program in social work (MSW) prepares students broadly in areas such as case work, counseling, community intervention, social policy and planning, research and development, and administration and management. The course work tends to be broader than that in counseling, and it focuses on developing skills to intervene and bring about social change on levels beyond the individual. Although clinical social workers are engaged in assessment and treatment of individuals, couples, families, and groups, they tend to view environmental factors as contributing strongly to an individual's or a family's problems. In addition to academic courses, a two-year supervised internship is part of the social worker's preparation for either direct or indirect social services. Several of our instructors, all of whom are social workers, provided the following input:

- In my own education, I found that my social-work program was broad-based, so less time was devoted to learning specific therapeutic techniques. I was frustrated with this as a student because I was eager to become a therapist. Now I am quite grateful for the background in policy and research.
- The MSW gives tremendous career flexibility because of the range of practice, including administration, planning, and policy areas.
- Because of the range within social work, you can actually change careers without a major retooling. You can go from direct practice to research to teaching to policy and planning.
- Employee assistance programs will become the new mental-health movement of the 1990s. Corporations are discovering that psychologically healthy employees are a better investment, and thus there will be many jobs in this area.
- An advantage of social work is job variety. Social workers are able to use their skills in different areas, such as employment in welfare agencies, industry, community organization, and clinical practice.
- A licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) has many options open for securing a position. I know of many licensed counselors who are struggling as

their job options are decreased. The LCSW degree provides maximum options in regard to specialties. You can specialize in clinical, child, family, group, community, and administration. The LCSW is an old, well-established profession with solid support nationwide. You can move from agency to agency, location to location, and state to state more easily than with certain other professional licenses.

*Clinical and counseling psychology.* Although clinical and counseling psychology are different specializations, there are no rigid boundaries separating their professional functions. We briefly consider them together to round out the picture of your options of a career as a professional helper. Although you can be licensed as a social worker, counselor, and marital and family therapist with a master's degree, this is not the case if you wish to refer to yourself as a psychologist. Both counseling and clinical psychology require a doctorate as a basic requisite for licensure. Clinical psychologists focus on assessment, diagnosis, and treatment procedures of mildly to severely disturbed persons. They interview clients and write case studies. Counseling psychologists assist relatively healthy people in solving developmental problems and functioning more effectively. They help clients find and use information to make better personal, educational, and occupational choices. Professional psychologists in both specialties often offer psychotherapy to individuals, couples, families, and groups; they may teach or conduct research. Both specializations focus on evaluation of treatments and programs and help clients develop action plans.

### *Factors to Consider in Choosing Your Career Path*

Making career choices is an ongoing process rather than an isolated event. People generally go through a series of stages when choosing a career path. Information from practitioners and professors can help you define a professional direction. But you cannot rely solely on the advice of others when making your career decisions. In today's world, it is wise to consider the advantages of becoming a generalist. Your chances of gaining employment in a managed care system are greater if you are able to work with a range of client populations in a variety of problem areas. Although you may develop expertise in a specific area, flexibility is often necessary to meet the changing demands in the marketplace.

Ultimately you must decide for yourself which path is likely to best tap your talents and bring you the most fulfillment. Consider the following factors in the career decision-making process: self-concept, interests, abilities, values, occupational attitudes, socioeconomic level, parental influence, ethnic identity, gender, and physical, mental, emotional, and social handicaps. We will discuss five of these factors in more detail—self-concept, motivation and achievement, interests, abilities, and values. Apply these areas to yourself as you consider the range of career possibilities you might want to pursue.

*Self-concept.* Some writers in career development contend that a vocational choice is an attempt to fulfill one's self-concept. People with a poor self-concept,

for example, are not likely to envision themselves in a meaningful or important job. They are likely to keep their aspirations low; as a result, their achievements will probably be low. They may select and remain in a job that they do not enjoy or derive satisfaction from because they are convinced that such a job is all they are worthy of. In this regard, choosing a vocation can be thought of as a public declaration of the kind of person you see yourself as being. Casey and Vanceburg (1985) capture the notion that how we view ourselves has a great deal to do with how others perceive and treat us: "Our self-perception determines how we present ourselves. The posture we've assumed invites others' praise, interest, or criticism. What others think of us accurately reflects our personal self-assessment, a message we've conveyed directly or subtly."

**Motivation and achievement.** Setting goals is at the core of the process of deciding on a vocation. If you have goals but do not have the energy and persistence to pursue them, your goals will not materialize. Your need to achieve, along with your achievements to date, is related to your motivation to translate goals into action plans. In thinking about your career choices, identify those areas where your drive is the greatest. Also, reflect on specific personal achievements. What have you accomplished that you feel particularly proud of? What are you doing now that moves you in the direction of achieving what is important to you? What are some of the things you dream about doing in the future? Thinking about your goals, needs, motivations, and achievements is a good way to get a clearer focus on your career direction.

**Interests.** Interest measurement is used extensively in career planning. Once you have determined your areas of vocational interest, you can identify possible positions for which these interests are appropriate. You can then focus your attention on those jobs for which you have the abilities required for satisfactory job performance. Working as a volunteer in a community agency is an excellent way to test your interests and abilities. Going to the career center for information, testing, and vocational counseling can also be helpful. Although interests are a significant element, you must also consider whether you have the ability to perform well on the job.

**Abilities.** Ability or aptitude is a significant factor in the career decision-making process, and it is probably used more often than any other factor. *Ability* refers to your competence in an activity; *aptitude* is your ability to learn. Scholastic aptitude is particularly significant if you need to enter a graduate program that will be a gateway to a position you seek in the helping professions. Consider the activities you have engaged in where you think you do especially well. Ask yourself what kind of activities you would find rewarding. To get a clearer sense of your aptitude, review your academic strengths and weaknesses. How open are you to academic learning? How quickly do you grasp concepts, and to what degree are you able to apply and use what you know? How far are you willing to go in your schooling?

**Values.** Once you have determined how your interests and abilities match with possible career choices, explore your values. It is important to assess, iden-