DIRECT GUIDANCE
ACTION STAGE

Suggested assignment: Before completing the exercises, read chapter 19 (“Skills of the Action Stage”) in Helping Skills.

Definition: Direct guidance refers to helper suggestions, directives, or advice, either within the session or outside sessions. Within-session guidance is called process advisement. Suggestions for actions outside of sessions are called directives.

Intentions: To promote change, to extend the helping process outside of the helping session and into other areas of the client’s life

Helpful hints:
• When your client asks for advice about what to do about a problem, assess whether this is an appropriate request or may be the expression of dependent feelings. When in doubt, explore the feelings involved (e.g., “You seem pretty anxious to get some answers. I wonder what’s going on for you.”)
• When you feel prompted to offer unsolicited advice to clients, check your own motivations. Consider whether you may be overinvested in a client’s taking a particular course of action.
• Pick direct guidance activities, such as homework, that matches the problem, is not overly difficult for the client to do, and is based on the client’s strengths.
• After suggesting some action, observe and listen to the client’s reactions and adjust your suggestion accordingly. Follow up with open questions, restatements, and reflection of feelings, when appropriate.

Difficulties helpers may experience:
• Believing they always know what is best for clients and providing direct guidance in a demanding manner, rather than collaboratively
• Underestimating their clients’ abilities to generate ideas or solutions and thus fostering dependency or, conversely, underestimating how difficult it is to change
• Prematurely giving directives before being sure that the client has explored the problem adequately, has accepted her or his feelings about the problem, and understands the problem thoroughly
• Feeling awkward and self-conscious when first using process advisement techniques such as role-playing, the two-chair technique, or relaxation skills

For class discussion: How can you determine whether clients really want or need direct guidance?

Practice Exercises for Direct Guidance

1. CLIENT: I have been seeing this guy behind my boyfriend’s back, and I feel horrible. I know that I don’t love my boyfriend, but I really don’t want to hurt his feelings. He is such a nice guy, and his family is so kind to me. But I really don’t want to be with someone I don’t love. God, this is such a mess. Why did this have to happen to me? This will devastate him. I know I should tell him, but every time I go to talk to him he gives me a card or brings me flowers or tells me that he loves me. Plus, what if it doesn’t work out with this new guy? Will I wish that I stayed with my boyfriend?

   Helper response:

2. CLIENT: You are never going to believe what happened to me! My teaching assistant asked me out. I have been going to her discussion sections for a while and we always talk afterwards. I know that I have a crush on her, but she’s older and I never dreamed that she would be interested in me. It seems kind of weird, I mean with her grading my papers and teaching this discussion class. What do I do? I mean, if I say no, she might grade me poorly, but if I say yes, what if it doesn’t work out? I guess I wanted to have a crush on her, but I never wanted it to go anywhere. Now I’m stuck.
3. CLIENT: OK, let me see if I understand. You want me to pretend that you are my boyfriend, and I am supposed to tell you how much I care about you? Sorry, but that seems so weird. I’m not sure I could do that—I mean—you’re not a guy and you’re not my boyfriend. What good does it do anyway? I just can’t seem to tell him how much I love him. It’s like I’m scared that he’ll leave me. I’ve never met someone whom I care about in the way that I love him. He is so special, and this is so scary. I’m not sure I know how to do what you are asking. I’ve never done a role-play before.

Helper response:

4. CLIENT: Part of me wants to go away for spring break, and part of me really wants to stay here and get caught up. It’s my senior year and I feel like I don’t want to miss my last spring break. But I’m behind in everything, and I haven’t even started to look for a job. My grandma has been really sick, and I know that my parents could use a hand with her. They need a break, but my friends keep on telling me that I deserve a break too. Hey, should I do that thing we did in here before where I play out each side of this dilemma? How did that work again?

Helper response: