

Immediacy for Levels 2-4

Students often ask, “What is immediacy?” These notes provide some guidance, practical examples and exercises for use with groups at all levels. They are not intended to be exclusive or cover all aspects of the subject.

Definition of immediacy

Immediacy is the ability of the counsellor/helper to use the immediate situation to invite the client to look at what is going on between them in the relationship. It often feels risky and unfamiliar. It implies the use of the present tense. It is one of the most powerful skills in counselling.

In its fullest use it involves:

- Revealing how you as the counsellor/helper are feeling
- Sharing a hunch or sense of what the client/helpee may be feeling here and now (and possibly linking this to the client’s issue)
- Inviting the client/helpee to explore what is going on between you

e.g. I notice that you haven’t looked at me all session which is leaving me feeling rather shut out. It feels as if you want to stop me getting too close... I wonder if that’s how it feels to you?

When to use immediacy

1. **To address any explicit or implicit pattern of relating** that may be being repeated in the helping relationship in order to help the client understand it better/deal with it.

e.g. I notice that you are responding very defensively to what I am saying even though I feel very accepting of what you are telling me. I wonder whether this is because ... (link to client issue).

e.g. I am aware that you have said that you never get angry, yet I am sensing that you are very angry with me even though your voice is quiet.

2. **To deal with difficulties**

(1) e.g. Lack of trust

You told me when you first arrived that you have never trusted anyone in your life. I wonder whether this is affecting how you feel towards me because I am sensing that you are not finding it easy to trust me.

(2) e.g. Boundary issues

I am finding it difficult to concentrate on what you are saying because I have just realised that I know the person you are talking about ... I am wondering whether you have noticed my reaction, and this is somehow affecting your ability to talk freely.

(3) e.g. An issue of difference that might be affecting the relationship

I am aware that you are a black female and I am a white male and I wonder how easy you are finding it to tell me about your experience of racial discrimination at work. Can we talk about this?

Guidelines for using immediacy as the counsellor/helper

- Be direct, clear and honest about your own internal response
- Be sensitive to client/helpee, being aware of what is difficult and choose your words carefully
- Be very aware of timing and the possible impact of this intervention
- Check out who it is for: “Why am I saying this? Will it help my client?”
- Be prepared to take the risk and follow through whatever emerges

Immediacy implies more than simply saying:

- “How are you feeling now?”
- “I notice that you are very sad.”

Or “I helped my client express her feelings in the here and now.”

Or “My client felt safe enough to show her feelings with me.”

Theoretical links

Immediacy is a skill that can be used and linked to all theoretical approaches, especially when working with clients’ patterns of relating (explicit and implicit).

e.g. Psychodynamic (offering an interpretation of what is going on in the relationship).

You seem to be responding very defensively to what I am saying even though I am not attacking you in any way. I wonder whether this is because I remind you of your father who was always on your case. Does that make sense to you?

e.g. Person centred (focusing on here and now awareness of self and other).

I am aware that your voice sounds very defensive, yet I am feeling very warm towards you. I wonder what is going on between us.

e.g. Transactional analysis (using the TA model openly with the client/helpee).

I am sensing a real defensiveness in you and I wonder whether it feels like I am the Critical Parent even though my feelings towards you are nurturing.

OR

I am aware that I want to respond to you as Critical Parent and I wonder if perhaps this is because you have taken the role of Child in what happened between us just now. Is this familiar?

e.g. **Cognitive behavioural** (using cognitive constructs to address patterns of relating).

I notice a defensiveness in your responses to me and it feels like the irrational belief we have talked about 'I am always in the wrong'. Let's look at this.

Power of immediacy as a relationship skill in counselling

Immediacy is a very powerful tool that is most effective when used sensitively by experienced counsellors who have a high level of self awareness and willingness to enter areas of the unknown with their clients in order to help them. It is uniquely therapeutic if the counsellor is willing to explore and share their own reactions non-defensively and honestly - an opportunity that most everyday relationships do not present.

It is powerful because it invites the *here and now* exploration of the client's patterns of relating in the immediate experiencing of their feelings, thoughts and bodily responses.

If difficulties are not addressed by using the skill of immediacy the working alliance can collapse and/or therapeutic progress may stagnate

e.g. If a client/helper does not trust the counsellor and this is not addressed it is likely that the client/helper will not turn up to the next session. The opportunity is then lost for addressing this in the relationship.

When used skilfully and sensitively immediacy can cut through unconscious (out of awareness) defences and responses (e.g. intellectualising, blaming, disassociation, helplessness, fear of vulnerability). The client can then be held, and the issue explored in the safety of the therapeutic frame.

e.g. As you are talking I am feeling an overwhelming sense of sadness even though your voice shows no emotion ... I am wondering whether this sadness is telling me something about what you are feeling inside at this moment?

Understanding of immediacy at different training levels

1. Level 2 CSK-L2

Candidates at this level would be expected to notice any obvious issue that needs addressing between helper and helpee and identify when the skill of immediacy has been used or could have been used.
e.g. Issues of difference.

2. Level 3 CST-L3

Candidates on this course of study would be expected to notice any obvious issue that needs addressing between helper and helpee and be able to use this skill and comment on how it is affecting the counselling process.

3. Level 4 TC-L4

Candidates at this level would be expected to use this skill with clients in order to address explicit and **implicit** issues affecting the client counsellor relationship. They would be expected to show an awareness of their own internal process in order to use this skill therapeutically and be able to make clear links to their own theoretical framework where appropriate (e.g. patterns of relating).

Suggested exercises to use the skill of immediacy for level 2 trainees

Role play to address an obvious difference:

Example the helper addresses an obvious difference with a helpee during the session because it may be an obstacle to the relationship e.g. class, age, colour, marital status, background, values.

Role play to address a difficulty:

Example Having agreed a counselling fee at the beginning of the session the client keeps dropping hints that they are really hard up and can't really afford the sessions. The counsellor is feeling confused and irritated.

Suggested exercise to explore self awareness and how it links to the skill of immediacy for Level 3 and 4 trainees.

Ask trainees to work in pairs as counsellor and client on any personal issue. Instead of the counsellor responding using counselling skills, experiment with responding with:

When you say that/do that/ look ... I feel/sense/and thinking ...

In discussion afterwards, explore the impact of sharing personal a response and how this may or may not relate to the client's issue.