



**McMaster Divinity
College**

**CS 3P1020/CS 5P1020
Basic Counselling Skills and Interventions**

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Fall 2026
Tuesday 11:00 am – 12:50pm

The mission of McMaster Divinity College is to develop effective evangelical Christian leaders for the Church, academy, and society through graduate-level education, spiritual development, and vocational formation.

COURSE SYLLABUS

1. COURSE DESCRIPTION

The ability to listen with accuracy, patience, and genuine compassion is foundational to every helping relationship, whether professional, pastoral, or personal. This practical skills course introduces students to the core micro-skills of empathic listening and growth-producing communication that support both clinical counselling and spiritual care.

The course is shaped by *Skills for Effective Counseling: A Faith-Based Integration*, which provides the main framework for weekly learning. Students will practice perceiving, attending, reflecting content and feeling, empathic reflection, clarifying, gently confronting discrepancies, using the self appropriately, supporting growth and change, attending to spiritual themes, and closing or referring well. William R. Miller's *Listening Well* serves as a required companion text, keeping accurate empathy and compassionate understanding at the centre of the course.

Because helping always occurs within social, cultural, spiritual, and relational contexts, students will consider how culture, worldview, faith, language, power, and difference shape each encounter. Students will practice listening with cultural humility and will explore how Christian faith, spiritual care, and ethical counselling practice can be integrated in ways that are ethical, respectful, and attentive to the person before them. Through repeated practice as helper, speaker, and observer within triads, students will learn to listen deeply, respond accurately, and reflect on their developing practice. The course requires active participation, self-awareness, appropriate vulnerability, and openness to feedback. Evaluation focuses not on the "perfect" response, but on growth in observation, feedback integration, and reflective practice.

As the term progresses, these skills are placed within the wider movement of a helping relationship: first contact, hearing the story, discerning direction, taking first steps, closing well, and referring when needs

exceed one's role. The aim is to cultivate compassionate presence toward oneself, those one serves, and the wider world. Competence is developed through practice, feedback, and honest reflection, not theory alone.

Core/Required Course for: MACSC, Specialization in Counseling and Spiritual Care

Elective for: Pastoral Studies

Advanced Research and Doctoral Students: 5- or 6-unit students needing to enroll in the course must obtain a separate set of course requirements from the instructor

2. COURSE FORMAT

This is an in-person course with a live stream option. All students who reside within 80 km of MDC are required to attend in-person unless permission is granted by MDC administration.

Class sessions will include didactic instruction, live skills demonstrations, and structured dialogue exercises in class within groups. Since this is a skills-development course, full participation in all class exercises is required.

There is no class on October 13th for Reading week.

3. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

These learning objectives are coordinated with the expected competencies for CASC/ACSS certified chaplains and pastoral counsellors and the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO Competencies noted).

Knowing

- To differentiate the roles of psychotherapist and pastoral counsellors in relation to other health professionals and recognize the limits of professional competence in understanding scope of practice (CRPO 4.1.2, 3.1.6)
- To distinguish the goals and phases of counselling, the roles of “counselor” and “counselee”, and the language terms of micro skills in therapeutic dialogue
- To be able to correctly identify the different types of responses and interventions which might occur in dyadic communication or dialogue
- To discriminate the kinds of responses and interventions that are helpful or not helpful in promoting growth and change, and in specific situations in the therapeutic relationship (CRPO 4.5.5, 4.5.7)
- To identify when and how to review therapeutic process and progress with clients periodically, make appropriate adjustments, and refer clients appropriately, and to identify the important factors in conducting an effective and appropriate closure process (4.5.3, 4.5.4, 4.6, 4.7)
- Recognize ethical issues encountered in practice, such as maintaining appropriate boundaries with clients, use of counsellor self-disclosure in therapy relationships, and how to respond to inappropriate client requests (CRPO 3.2.1)
- Integrate knowledge of human and cultural diversity in relation to psychotherapy practice, in terms of understanding how cultural factors can influence therapeutic engagement and response to interventions, recognizing multicultural implications of some basic counselling interventions, and recognizing cultural barriers that may affect engagement in the therapeutic process to enable modification of interventions according to cultural needs and preferences (CRPO 1.5, 1.5.1, 1.5.2)

Being

- To increase comfort with self-disclosure, within one's own sense of safety and boundaries, and as appropriate to the assignments
- To increasingly practice empathic listening skills and effective responses in all our relationships
- To increase tolerance in hearing others' pain and being open to the experience of one's own pain
- To develop a growing self-awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses
- To better understand one's motivating factors, thoughts, and feelings, in pursuit of safe and effective use of self, and developing the person of the counsellor
- To develop greater comfort and appreciation for receiving feedback from peers and teachers

Doing

- To observe, identify, and demonstrate helpful versus non helpful responses in therapeutic dialogue (CRPO 4.5.5, 4.5.7)
- To demonstrate micro-skills in noticing, reflecting, and validating, both content and feelings, to establish relationship, encourage deeper exploration and growth, and consolidate learnings (CRPO 4.5.5, 4.5.6, 4.5.7, 4.5.8)
- To demonstrate micro-skills in clarifying, confronting, using metaphors, and using authenticity, self-disclosure and immediacy to encourage growth and change (CRPO 4.5.9, 4.5.10)
- To practice obtaining informed consent and explaining client rights to privacy and confidentiality, and the limitations imposed on them by law (CRPO 3.1.1, 3.1.5, 4.1.5, 4.1.7))

4. COURSE TEXTS

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College's book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 145, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstore, 5 International Blvd, Etobicoke, Ontario M9W 6H3: phone 416.620.2934; fax 416.622.2308; email books@readon.ca. Other book services such as Amazon may also carry the texts.

A. Required Textbook for all students:

Nesbit Sbanotto, E. A., Gingrich, H. D., & Gingrich, F. C. (2026). **Skills for Effective Counseling: A Faith-Based Integration** (2nd ed.). IVP Academic. ISBN 9781514014936.

Miller, W. R. (2018). **Listening Well: The Art of Empathic Understanding**. Wipf & Stock. ISBN 9781532634840.

B. Recommended

Ivey, Allen E., Mary Bradford Ivey, and Carlos P. Zalaquett. **Intentional Interviewing and Counseling: Facilitating Client Development in a Multicultural Society**. 10th ed. Boston: Cengage.

Recommended for students who wish to go deeper or who anticipate further clinical training.

Egan, Gerard, and Robert J. Reese. **The Skilled Helper: A Problem-Management and Opportunity-Development Approach to Helping**. Boston: Cengage.

Another textbook for students who wish to read further.

Chapters from these recommended texts are listed in the Course Schedule as optional (advanced) readings, for students who wish to go further or who anticipate further clinical training.

5. INSTRUCTOR

Biography: Ruth Baah-Gyebi is a Registered Psychotherapist (RP) with the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO) and an Assistant Affiliate Professor of Counselling and Spiritual Care (part-time) at McMaster Divinity College. She specializes in traumatology and couples counselling and is a CRPO-approved clinical supervisor.

With over 26 years of clinical experience across the UK/Europe, Canada, and Africa, Ruth offers psychotherapy to individuals, couples, and families from diverse cultural and spiritual backgrounds. Ruth is the co-founder and Practice Director of *Elpizo Counselling Services*, a private group practice in Ontario that currently supports over 25 practitioners. In this role, she manages the practice and provides clinical supervision, mentorship, and practice development support to practicum students in Master of Social Work and Psychotherapy programs, as well as to seasoned clinicians. She also offers consultation to faith leaders, academic institutions, and business professionals on individual and organizational well-being.

Ruth is a seasoned trainer and educator with extensive experience delivering clinical and spiritual care training. She has previously taught counselling skills, and Practicum at Seneca College and regularly facilitates workshops and seminars for mental health professionals, churches, and community groups. Her passion lies in equipping emerging therapists and Christian leaders with the knowledge, skills, and ethical grounding needed for competent and compassionate practice in multicultural and spiritually integrated care settings.

She holds a Master of Counselling Studies from the University of Edinburgh and is currently completing her PhD in Guidance and Counselling. Ruth has been joyfully married for 33 years to her husband, affectionately known as "Dr. Love", who is also a psychotherapist and co-founder of Elpizo. Together, they are blessed with three adult children.

Contact and Availability: Ruth will be available for brief consultations 15 minutes before class begins, and during breaks. Questions and other communications can be directed to email: baahgyer@mcmaster.ca

6. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Course Assignments

i. Skills Laboratory, Triad Practice, Recorded Peer Review, and Learning Log - 35% - Due Oct. 27th.

The skills laboratory is the centre of this course. Each week, students will work in triads and rotate through the roles of **helper, speaker, and observer**. In these groups, students will practice the skill of the week through short, real conversations drawn from ordinary life, at a depth each student chooses.

In addition to in-class practice, students are expected to meet with their triads outside of class for continued practice. During the term, each student will record one **5–10 minute practice session** in which they serve in the helper role. This recording will be brought or made available for in-class peer review and feedback, including submitting mid-term log;

Students will also keep a **Learning Log and Action Plan** throughout the course. The log is a place to record key insights, skills, questions, feedback, and action steps that emerge from readings, class discussions, triad practice, peer review, and personal reflection. Students should aim to make an entry most weeks. Entries may be brief, but they should be thoughtful, specific, and connected to growth as a listener and helper.

This assignment is formative. Students are not expected to demonstrate perfect technique. The purpose is to grow in presence, listening, observation, feedback, self-awareness, and reflective practice.

Students will be assessed on:

- presence, preparation, and engagement in class and triad practice; completion of the recorded peer-review session;
- willingness to practice the weekly skill and receive coaching;
- quality of feedback offered as observer and peer reviewer;
- respect for the speaker's chosen level of disclosure;
- care for confidentiality within the learning community;
- consistency and thoughtfulness of Learning Log entries; & evidence of growth over the term.

Using real but manageable material: When serving as speaker, students should bring a real issue from ordinary life rather than acting or role-playing. The material should be genuine, but it does not need to be serious, highly personal, or emotionally intense. Useful topics may include procrastination, time management, everyday worry, perfectionism, difficulty saying no, low confidence, boundaries, habits, or balancing study, work, ministry, and family.

All recorded sessions must follow course expectations for consent, confidentiality, and respectful use of personal material. Recordings are used only for course learning and peer feedback unless otherwise approved by the instructor. Students are never required to disclose beyond their own sense of safety and readiness. What is shared in triads is to be treated with care and kept within the learning community.

The Learning Log template will be available on A2L. A copy of the log is due at midterm and again at the end of the semester.

Note: Possible in class coaching during skills lab by external therapists

ii. Reflection Paper - 30% - Due Nov. 17th

Students will write a **5–7 page integrative reflection paper** in the first person. This paper invites students to reflect on their growth as listeners and helpers over the semester. It should demonstrate depth, honesty, self-awareness, and thoughtful integration rather than extensive citation or formal research.

Students should reflect on three areas:

Skill and Self: Which listening and counselling skills come more naturally? Which are more difficult? What has practicing in front of others revealed about your habits, strengths, anxieties, assumptions, or growing edges?

Culture and Humility: How do your cultural, social, family, and faith backgrounds shape the way you listen, respond, interpret, and relate to others? What have the differences in the classroom, triads, or wider context taught you about cultural humility, power, worldview, and listening well?

Calling and Care: What kind of helping presence are you becoming as a therapist, chaplain, pastor, or spiritual care provider? What will help sustain your compassion, boundaries, faith, and self-awareness over time?

Engagement with at least one required course text should be evident. Students may draw on Sbanotto et al., Miller, class learning, triad practice, feedback, and their Learning Log and Action Plan. The paper will be assessed on depth of reflection, integration of course learning, clarity, honesty, and evidence of personal and professional growth.

iii. Final Integrative Session and Self-Evaluation - 35% - Due Dec. 11th

For the final assignment, each student will record a **20-minute helping conversation** and submit it with a **5–7 page self-evaluation**. The recording must follow the same consent, confidentiality, and safety expectations used throughout the course.

This assignment asks students to demonstrate the integrated use of the basic listening sequence and to reflect on their development from the beginning of the course to the final session. Students should show growth in attending, reflecting content and feeling, empathic reflection, clarifying, summarizing, and responding with care to the speaker's meaning and context.

The self-evaluation should address:

1. **Growth over the term - How** has your listening and helping presence changed since the first weeks of class?
2. **Skill integration** - How did you use the basic listening sequence in the final session? Where did you attend, reflect, clarify, summarize, or support exploration well?
3. **Evaluation of the recording** - Identify specific moments that show your current skill level. What would you name as evidence of competence? What would you do differently with further practice?
4. **Current growth edges** - What skills, habits, or personal patterns still need development?
5. **Plan for continued development** - What concrete steps will you take to continue growing as a listener and helper?

6. **Application to your setting** - How will these skills be carried into your context, whether counselling, chaplaincy, pastoral ministry, spiritual care, community work, or everyday helping relationships?

This is the assignment in which skill competence is most directly assessed. Evaluation will consider both the student's use of core helping skills and the capacity to assess their own work with honesty, clarity, humility, and grace.

7. COURSE SCHEDULE

Classes meet on Tuesdays. Required readings are to be completed before each class. The course follows the micro-skills progression of Skills for Effective Counseling, with Listening Well as a companion. Optional (advanced) readings, drawn from the recommended texts (Ivey; Egan), are for students who wish to go further or who anticipate further clinical training. There is no class on October 13 (Reading Week).

Date	Theme & Focus	Reading	Skills Lab / Milestone
Sep 15	The Helping Relationship & the Micro-skills Approach.	Required: Sbanotto ch. 1; Miller, Together & Accurate Empathy Optional (advanced): Ivey ch. 1	Form triads; learning covenant; "what makes us feel heard"; begin Learning Log
Sep 22	The Person of the Helper	Required: Sbanotto ch. 2; Miller, The Attitude of Empathic Understanding Optional (advanced): Ivey, introductory material	Values & assumptions inventory
Sep 29	Perceiving: Learning to Notice Well	Required: Sbanotto ch. 3; Miller, How Accurate Empathy Works & The Picture Without the Sound Optional (advanced): Ivey chs. 3–4	Observation practice; perception dyads
Oct 6	Attending & Presence	Required: Sbanotto ch. 4; Miller, Roadblocks to Listening Optional (advanced): Ivey chs. 3–4	Attending dyads; spotting roadblocks
Oct 13	READING WEEK — Thanksgiving / Mid-term Recess (no class)	—	—
Oct 20	Reflecting Content	Required: Sbanotto ch. 5; Miller, Forming Reflections Optional (advanced): Ivey ch. 6	Paraphrase & summary drills
Oct 27	Reflecting Feeling	Required: Sbanotto ch. 6; Miller, Diving Deeper Optional (advanced): Ivey ch. 7	DUE: Recorded Peer Review (in class); Learning Log - midterm copy
Nov 3	Empathic Reflection & the Basic Listening Sequence	Required: Sbanotto ch. 7; Miller, Affirming Optional (advanced): Ivey ch. 8	Feeling-word vocabulary; reflection laddering
Nov 10	Clarifying & the Art of Helpful Questions	Required: Sbanotto ch. 9; Miller, Asking Questions Optional (advanced): Ivey ch. 5	Question drills
Nov 17	Deep Empathy, Meaning & Communication Across Difference	Required: Sbanotto chs. 10 & 8; Miller, Listening for Values	Meaning-reflection practice; helping across difference;

		Optional (advanced): Ivey, multicultural & meaning material	DUE: Reflection Paper (Nov 17)
Nov 24	Advanced Empathic Reflection, Challenge & the Here-and-Now	Required: Sbanotto chs. 11–13; Miller, Listening Well in Conflict & Expressing Yourself Optional (advanced): Ivey ch. 9	Confrontation & immediacy role-plays;
Dec 1	From Story to Direction: Growth, Change & Spiritual Meaning	Required: Sbanotto chs. 14 & 16; Miller, Empathic Understanding in Close Relationships Optional (advanced): Ivey, goals/action; Egan, story–goal–action	Focusing & goal-setting; attending to the sacred
Dec 8	Risk, Safety, Ethics & Referral	Required: CRPO Professional Practice Standards & Code of Ethics (selected); instructor readings on risk & referral Optional (advanced): Tan/Egan on scope & referral	Risk-triage scenarios; referral network. DUE: Final Integrative Session & Self-Evaluation (Dec 11); Learning Log - final copy
Dec 15	Endings, Integration & the Self of the Helper	Required: Sbanotto ch. 17; Miller, The Promise of Empathic Understanding Optional (advanced): Ivey, full BLS review; Egan, endings	Course integration; closing well

8. COURSE ADMINISTRATION

MDC Style for Submission of Written Work

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/> This includes spelling, grammar, and syntax accuracy. Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions. Students are encouraged to have their work proofread. For this course, where relevant templates will be provided.

Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one's own (regardless of the means of its production, including AI) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student's dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

A special note about AI: You are expected to do your own thinking and to write your own papers, etc., and not to have AI do this work for you. There may be value in using an AI tool to help you locate and collate resources or to help you “tidy up” your English grammar, usage, and mechanics, especially if English is not your native language. However, using AI to create content for you and then submitting that content as if you created it is

considered plagiarism (i.e., submitting work that is not one's own as if it is one's own) and is a violation of the academic honesty policy.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the content of this course is intended to be accessible to all students who are enrolled in the course, including those with disabilities. If a student requires accommodation to participate fully in this course, that student is to contact SAS at McMaster University, who will then work directly with the McMaster Divinity College Registrar to negotiate reasonably appropriate accommodation for the student. The MDC Registrar will communicate with faculty regarding necessary accommodations. Please note that an accommodation is not retroactive and must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation.

Gender Inclusive Language

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSV (2022), TEV/GNB/GNT (1976), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

Submission of Written Work

This course is uniquely structured so that the readings prepare the student for class engagement and what will be practiced in class. Therefore, students are expected to complete the assigned readings before each class and come prepared to discuss, practice, and apply the skills introduced in those readings.

Final Assignments/Evaluation: Must be handed in on Avenue to Learn, with digital audio/video recording uploaded as well (digital format to be explained in class). ***Because of the grading time involved, late submissions will not be accepted after midnight December 11th.***

Hybrid Class Participation Expectations

This course is offered in a hybrid format, with both in-person and virtual students. Because this is a skills-based course, all students are expected to be fully present and actively engaged in class exercises, discussions, triads, and peer feedback.

Students participating virtually must join from a private and confidential space, similar to the conditions expected for a virtual counselling or spiritual care session. Cameras are expected to remain on throughout class, except in brief or exceptional circumstances. Virtual students should be prepared to participate verbally, join breakout rooms, practise skills, and offer feedback in the same way as students attending in person.

Cell Phone/Computer Policy

Students are to refrain from texting or conducting cell phone conversations while class is in session. Should you need to maintain contact with family members and/or your church or ministry, please turn off the ringer to avoid disturbing others; upon receipt of an urgent call, you may discretely excuse yourself from the classroom or video conference. The same policy applies to all computer-generated sound schemes or other electronic annunciation systems. It is expected that the student will have their camera on for all virtual/livestreamed lectures, but to mute their microphone unless instructed otherwise.

Absence Due to Illness

If you must miss class due to an illness, you must contact me (via email) as soon as possible to let me know. Likewise, if I should become ill, I will communicate with you via A2L about how we will make up class sessions. Although much of the course content will be made available via A2L, it would still be a good idea to have a friend take notes for you, if possible.

Inclement Weather

If on a class meeting day MDC closes due to inclement weather, I reserve the right to move the lessons and, where possible, class activities for the week to A2L (asynchronous format). This will help to ensure that we stay on target in the course.

Copyright: *This syllabus is the property of the instructor and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions up to and including the first day of class.*