



# ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

## From oracle chambers to clinics and community work

I caught up with Dr Dione Mifsud, Head of the Department of Counselling (e. 2012) within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, Senate member and Harassment Officer at the University of Malta.

### Are people still embarrassed to come to counselling?

While some stigma still exists, I have seen a significant change over the past few years. More people are aware of mental health issues and are ready to work hard to enhance their psychological wellbeing. While more people are using the services of professional counsellors it is also pertinent to note that issues in general wellbeing are different and many times more challenging than they were a few decades ago. It is pertinent to note that the social media is changing the ways relationships are construed and managed and this is a new trend that is making conflict resolution in relationships a bit more difficult.

### Can counselling help people out of their problems?

Counselling is mostly about attending, listening, understanding and challenging skills. When a person indulges in negative thoughts and limiting behaviour, it is the counsellor's job to understand, to empathise and to accompany the client on a journey that may well include challenging present negative personal beliefs and behaviours as well as addressing past situations and traumas that may be contributing to the person's present situation. The counsellor's job is to accompany the person to deconstruct and change those limiting behaviours.

### Are counselling services available only to those who can pay?

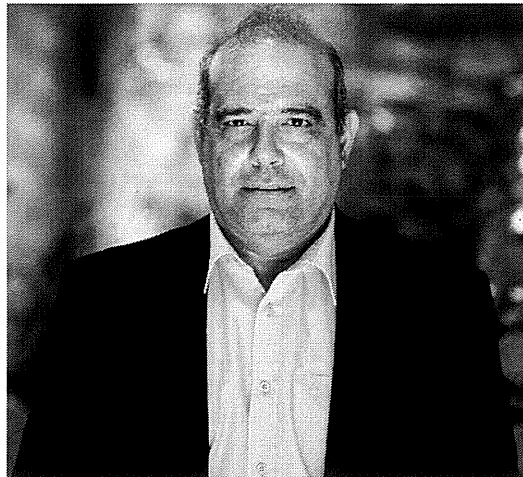
Counselling in itself is a service and should be available to all. While many clients opt for a private service, counselling is available for free in many public institutions and NGOs. Obviously it is never enough and as I have already said, the tendency that more people are finding it easier to speak and work on their life issues may mean that institutions need to employ more counsellors.

### Are counselling services available to children?

All our schools have counselling services and this has been offered since the 1970s. School counselling is a specialisation in its own right. Counsellors are also trained to use creative approaches that work well with children. Children are human beings who, though they are not adults, go through the same emotions, doubts and fears that adults do, sometimes even more intensely.

### Does the fact that we need these services mean that communities are failing to 'take care of its own'?

I will answer 'No' to the first part



of the question. Forms of counselling have existed since time immemorial. We have 'oracle chambers' in our prehistoric temples. The ancient world is full of stories of people making long journeys to visit oracles, shamans, witch doctors and priests to get some kind of illumination. People go to persons they can trust to receive insights, solace and understanding. It is amazing that counselling transcends all cultures as well. Modern day counselling is a continuation of this phenomenon but is now anchored within established professional competencies and skills. However, I will answer 'Yes' to the second question. Life is becoming too stressful, relationships are becoming more complicated and the social media has opened a completely different new world in a very short time. Technological and cultural changes are happening too fast and the time needed for humans to adapt to changing situations is now either too short or non-existent.

### Are we providing enough social services?

Enough is not a good word to use. It is never enough and it is not a cliché. I see that schools certainly need more counsellors as they are too few and all are overwhelmed with work. I see the need for community counselling services within local councils and parishes. I see counsellors working with patients and their relatives in the health sector and I see counsellors supporting the professional staff in the services sector. Service, the act of being a constant 'giver' does take its toll.

### Confidentiality at all costs?

There are limits to confidentiality and these are agreed with the

client at the start of a counselling process. In Malta the three major limits are that a counsellor needs to report when a life is in jeopardy, e.g. an intention to kill or take one's life. Counsellors can be exonerated from professional confidentiality by a court of law. Counsellors also need to report abuse on children. Having said that confidentiality is the single area that causes most problems for counsellors as they need to make decisions that may have repercussions in the long run. For example, mandatory reporting may mean that potential clients will be afraid to speak about abuse or suicidal intentions.

### How can we strengthen our communities?

Communities need to be able to meet, form relationships and provide meaning of their lives. They need to have the physical space to be able to do this. This is becoming less as our natural environment is eaten up and we will suffer from this in the next few years. Communities need to have the time to meet as a community but time is being taken away from us through wasted time in traffic jams, less time for families to be together, which I feel is a direct product of too many after school activities for children and long hours of work for one or both parents. We are slowly losing our reputation as a collectivist society and becoming disengaged individuals. Changing this trend will however be difficult though not necessarily impossible. So to answer your question, we can strengthen our communities by giving them the time to be together and the space to meet together.

### What is bereavement? Does

### everyone go through the same stages?

I went through bereavement only a few weeks ago and lived through what the theories say. My family was grieving in hospital over the death of a loved family member. We were all stunned as it all happened very suddenly and very simply did not know what to do. Back home we all sat together to give our relative a beautiful funeral, and after the funeral we met to reminisce. Life then went on and most of the bereavement was done privately with everyone carrying and trying to manage the loss with feelings of sadness, doubt, incredulity and the reminder of our own mortality. Bereavement brings forth all this as we try to come to terms with the passing of a loved one and what it means to us in terms of loss and re-engaging with our own mortality.

### What are the main areas of research of your department?

We are right now focusing on issues around counselling ethics, counselling practice and supervision. We also focus on transcultural and intercultural counselling and experiences, school counselling and community counselling.

### What courses do you offer and how can they contribute towards improving our communities?

We currently offer two master's degrees, Master in Counselling and Master of Arts in Transcultural Counselling. We offer a PhD programme and a Counselling Supervision programme. We aim to offer other specialist courses in the near future including specialist courses in different counselling approaches, courses on creative counselling with children, adults, couples and families. All our courses are aimed at improving our communities through providing professionals who are competent, ethical and who understand the needs of the persons who seek our services. We also want to create a culture which respects the similarities and diversities of human beings living together in a common space. Finally, through our research we want to inform society of what works and what works less within relationships and societies and how counselling can help to address these issues.

Prospective students who want more information on counselling courses may find the information on the university website <https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/keyword/Postgraduate/Counselling> or contact the Department or by calling 2340 3518.

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