

Training Plan for NFP Counsellors

FOREWORD

This Training Plan constitutes the operational basis for the preparation and implementation of training courses for NFP counsellors as guided by Sensiplan. It also provides a framework for the counsellors' commitment to ongoing professional development.

Training, advanced training and ongoing professional development are the responsibility of the Maltese NFP working group under the umbrella of the Maltese Association for Health Promotion & Prevention of Disease. These activities are being pursued in close cooperation with the NFP Research Project and the relevant central body in the Church.

Training to become an NFP counsellor

1

Preparation and accomplishment of the training programme for NFP counsellors is based on the following principles:

1.1 Qualifications of course leaders

The course can only be led by individuals who have already completed the requisite training for becoming a course leader. The basis for this training is the most current version of the course leaders' manual, as approved by the NFP working group.

1.1.1 Prerequisites for the training of course leaders

In order to take part in the training for course leaders, participants must be NFP counsellors who have completed their training and been awarded their certificate. In addition, they must also have undergone training in the fields of pedagogy, medicine or psychology. Prospective course leaders must have a thorough understanding of relevant methodologies, are required to act as a contact person for difficult counselling cases and function as a link between trainees and the NFP working group. Prospective course leaders must have previously worked as a tutor on at least one training course for the duration of the whole course.

1.1.2 Duration of training

Training for course leaders will take place over a minimum of 56 training hours. Among the subjects dealt with over the course, are the following:

- **Advanced methodology training**
- **Discussion of alternative natural family planning methods**
- **Work on original cycle courses**
- **Provision of specific topics on didactics (teachers/psychologists)**
- **Advanced training in specific topics relating to gynaecology and obstetrics (medical doctors)**
- **Discussion of particular problems course leaders may face and the development of strategies to overcome them.**

1.1.3 Training materials

Mandatory training material for the course leader training are the practice book and the “Natural & Safe” workbook, the handbook for NFP counsellor training, and the course leaders manual, in addition to the scientific publications of the NFP working group.

1.2 Course leadership

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the course can only be led by a team.

1.2.1 Composition of the leadership team

The team comprises of:

- a medical doctor (course leader)
- an educator or a
- psychologist (course leader)
- and tutors (no more than six participants allocated per tutor)

All members of the course leaders’ team must already be fully trained NFP counsellors who have been awarded their certificates. In addition, the course leaders in charge must have worked as tutors on at least one training course and have completed specific training for course leaders.

1.2.2 Appointment

A leadership team is newly appointed for each course, in consultation with the organiser and the NFP working group, and will be appointed by the NFP working group to teach the course. The appointment is terminated at the end of every course. The appointment also provides for the duty of the leadership team to conduct the course in accordance with the instructions found in the course leaders' manual.

In order to be appointed as instructors, candidates must demonstrate their suitability for the position. This proof must include the NFP counsellor certificate, practical experience working as an NFP counsellor, and relevant professional development with a focus on adult education, marriage, family and life counselling or medicine. Course leaders must also undertake further training in order to familiarise themselves with the latest knowledge of natural family planning/Sensiplan, and to subsequently incorporate this knowledge into their teaching in a responsible manner.

1.2.3 Duties of the leadership team

The leadership team for the training course comprises of medical and pedagogical course leaders, as well as tutors. The tutors' task is to provide personal support to the participants throughout the whole course in consistently small groups.

1.2.3.1 The medical doctor

Since NFP counselling is first and foremost located within the field of medicine, a medical doctor shall be responsible for the knowledge shared as part of the training course. Through relevant scientific-oriented ongoing professional development, and in close cooperation with the NFP working group, the doctor must ensure that he or she is always up-to-date with the most recent developments in the field, which should be imparted to the participants in a suitable manner.

1.2.3.2 The educator or psychologist

The educator's first task is to ensure that the training course is conducted so as to enable the participants to learn and explore the course content within the allotted time. In addition, the educator is responsible for ensuring that the participants learn and practice didactic and psychological methods, enabling them to familiarise interested couples with NFP in order that they may apply it independently.

1.2.3.3 Tutors

The tutors are the final members of the leadership team for the training course. Their task is to provide support to the participants throughout the course in consistently small groups. In these small groups, the participants work on psychological and pedagogical issues, as well as discussing practice cycles and the participants' own cycles. Depending on their inclination and in consultation with the course leaders, the tutors can also take on certain duties related either to the subjects being taught, or of an organisational nature.

1.3 Training for NFP counsellors

The goal of NFP training is to enable NFP counsellors to familiarise interested parties with Sensiplan so that they can promptly and independently follow Sensiplan in a reliable manner. Training is divided into a theoretical stage and a practical stage. Both stages are based on the course leader manual and the training manual for NFP counsellors. Successful completion of the course will lead to the award of a certificate.

1.3.1 Admission to training as an NFP counsellor

The prerequisites for attending a training course are the following:

- **Attendance over three cycles at an NFP introductory course taught by an NFP counsellor. The counsellor will have been approved by the NFP working group and will have used the workbook throughout the course. Evidence that the potential participant has also observed six of their own cycles is required.**

The organiser and the course leaders decide who will be allowed to undertake training, in close consultation with the NFP working group. In case of doubt, or if a candidate does not fulfil the aforementioned requirements for admission, the NFP working group will make the final decision on whether to admit them or not.

1.3.2 Theoretical training

A prospective NFP counsellor must successfully complete at least 60 hours of theoretical training in which the following subjects are taught in compliance with the mandatory guidelines set forth in the course leader manual:

- **Anatomical and physiological foundations of procreation and of the female cycle**
- **Sensiplan's policy for routine and special situations (breast feeding, menopause, cessation of hormone-based contraceptives, situation following childbirth/miscarriages, irregular cycles)**
- **Didactic aspects of counselling sessions**
- **Psychological aspects of counselling sessions**
- **Practising cycle assessment, teaching methods and conversational manner**

For doctors, medical students and others with medical training (e.g. midwives), the theoretical training component can be substantially shortened if all participants in the course have this background. However, courses must last no fewer than four days.

1.3.3 Completion of theoretical training

The theoretical training component is concluded with a written examination. To take the examination, participants must have attended at least five of the six theoretical training modules. The examination deals with examples of menstrual cycles and tests knowledge of NFP methods and issues concerning anatomical and physiological foundations of human reproduction, insofar as they are relevant to Sensiplan's interests.

The following subject matters must be included among examples of menstrual cycles:

- **All options for measuring both temperature and cervical mucus at the beginning and end of the menstrual cycle**
- **All options for determining the infertile period at the start of a cycle, by using fixed methods**
- **A temperature pattern that necessitates the use of special methods**
- **Temperature readings that are distorted by delayed measurement times and other circumstances when temperature is at its lowest point and when it is rising**
- **Mistaken assessment made by the client**
- **Sexual contacts during the fertile period, which require the counsellor to warn of a possible pregnancy and discuss the couple's family planning goals.**

The questions for the written examination are drafted by the NFP working group and the examination is conducted locally by the organiser. Examinations are monitored by individuals appointed by the NFP working group.

Course leaders correct the examinations in accordance with a marking or assessment system provided by the NFP working group and then submit the results to the working group. To pass the examination, a trainee must attain a predetermined number of points and must not misstate the duration of the fertile period when answering any of the questions.

Even when a candidate fails to attain the requisite number of points, in certain cases the NFP working group may, after consulting the course leaders, award a pass mark if by fulfilling additional requirements, the uncertainties can be mitigated.

The NFP working group alone shall verify whether the requirements have been properly fulfilled and shall make the final decision on whether the candidate has passed the examination. Candidates who fail an examination may repeat it once, after three months have elapsed and after complying with any conditions specified by the NFP working group. The NFP working group will make known the examination results and will authorise candidates to carry out their practical training.

1.3.4 Practical training

Only candidates who have passed the written examination are allowed to undergo practical training. A candidate's practical training consists of explaining how to use Sensiplan to three women or three couples. The explanation is based on the introductory commentary. When two NFP counsellors are married to each other and both start practical training together, they may jointly advise the requisite three clients. Of the three clients, at least two must wish to avoid pregnancy.

Course participants are forbidden to advise any other women except these three clients until they have passed their oral examinations and received their certificates.

Minutes must be taken of the counselling sessions. These minutes must be submitted together with the menstrual cycle records at the time of the oral examination.

The minutes must clearly state:

- **The matters discussed**
- **Any problems reported by the clients over the course of the counselling session**
- **Whether the clients have made mistaken assessments, and if so, which ones**
- **How the counsellor dealt with mistakes and problems.**

Practical training includes two full-day sessions devoted to further education, during which counselling issues and difficulties are discussed.

If a trainee participant fails to start practical training within one year of being approved for such training, the approval becomes void. If this occurs and the trainee later wishes to undergo practical training, he or she must submit another application stating the reasons why this is the case. The NFP working group will then consider which conditions the trainee must fulfil to commence practical training. In such cases, it is recommended that the written examination be repeated, and that the participant attend a training course for a while.

Practical training must be completed within one year of its start date. If the practical training is completed after this period, the trainee must submit an application stating the reasons for this. The NFP working group will then consider under which conditions practical training may be extended.

1.3.5 Completion of NFP counsellor training

1.3.5.1 Oral examination and certificate

The NFP working group, in consultation with the course leaders and the organiser, will set the time and date of the oral examination, once all or most of the participants have completed their practical training. Normally candidates will be examined individually. In exceptional cases that warrant it, candidates may be examined in pairs. Married couples are usually examined jointly. Each candidate or married couple is examined for between 30 and 45 minutes. Exceptions to this rule may be allowed on submission of a written application to that effect.

The examination board is composed of one representative of the NFP working group, a gynaecologist appointed by the working group, and one of the two course leaders. The examination board is chaired by the gynaecologist. In exceptional cases, if warranted and the examination board does not object, others may attend the examination but shall have no authority to ask questions or to participate in decisions.

Each candidate must take the following to the oral examination: three counselling cycles for each of the clients initiated in Sensiplan and the minutes of the counselling sessions. If a candidate fails to submit all of the completed counselling cycles at the time of the oral examination, the examination board may allow him or her to take the oral examination if circumstances so warrant. In such cases, if the candidate passes the examination, the pass mark will not become valid until the candidate submits the missing cycles, complete and error-free, to the NFP working group. Various aspects of the counselling situation are examined by referring to the cycles and session minutes submitted by the candidate.

Over the course of the oral examination, the examination board should be persuaded, in particular, that

- **the candidate is aware that Sensiplan's reliability is problematical and is capable of providing nuanced advice.**
- **the candidate is sensitive to the user's personal circumstances (i.e., family planning goals, relationship with the partner and family situation, social factors etc.).**
- **the candidate is aware of his or her limitations.**
- **the candidate is capable of determining, in view of the specific situation and notes, whether the woman he or she is counselling has mastered the skill of reliably assessing her cycles.**

The examination board's decision to pass a candidate must be unanimous. The candidate's performance is recorded in a separate memorandum and signed by the chair of the examination board and by the representative of the NFP working group that is present.

If a candidate fails the oral examination, a detailed record of the reasons why must be made. A faulty assessment by the client or couple should not constitute grounds for failure in the examination. Instead, a fail mark should be given to an NFP counsellor who failed to realise that the assessment was faulty, neglected to inform the client of this fact, and failed to take suitable measures to assure additional practice and repetition by the client. The award of a definitive pass mark can be made conditional upon an extension of the practical training. In all other cases, the candidate shall be deemed to have failed the examination.

Trainees who successfully complete their training are awarded a certificate in recognition of this.

1.3.5.2 Appointment as an NFP counsellor on behalf of the Natural Family Planning working group

In addition to awarding the certificate, the NFP working group may authorise the candidate to work as an NFP counsellor on behalf of the working group and as part of its organisational structure. An NFP counsellor undertakes to:

- **comply with the NFP working group's conditions and guidelines.**
- **regularly pursue further training and to accept counselling assignments at least once every two years, after receiving the certificate.**
- **acknowledge that he or she will work as a member of a regional group of NFP counsellors.**
- **consult the regional group or doctors affiliated with the NFP working group in the event that special counselling issues arise.**
- **observe complete secrecy regarding the personal and economic circumstances of persons whom he or she meets in his or her capacity as an NFP counsellor. This duty also applies to the discussion of individual cases including those discussed during further education or training events.**
- **counsel at least one client per year, in order to acquire a modicum of practical experience.**

The NFP working group is both entitled and obligated to repeatedly verify compliance of NFP counsellors with its guidelines. In the event of violations, the counsellor must be given instructions and advice. In cases of doubt and special situations, continued acknowledgement of counsellor status can be made contingent upon compliance with certain requirements. If such requirements are not met, or if the counsellor repeatedly and unequivocally breaches the NFP working group's guidelines, the working group must revoke its acknowledgement.

NFP counselling as a member of the NFP working group

2

NFP counsellors may practise within the NFP Team's organisational structure and on its behalf only if they have been acknowledged and authorised to do so by the NFP working group. Counsellors are obligated to abide by the NFP working group guidelines, including any possible amendments thereof. The NFP working group exercises ultimate authority.

NFP counselling is considered a service that must be rendered to whomsoever desires it, regardless of his or her identity and motives.

Counselling addresses people who want it and who

- wish to learn more about their bodies
- wish to become pregnant or
- wish to avoid pregnancy.

The aim of counselling is to enable women or couples to observe, record and assess bodily changes occurring over the course of the menstrual cycle, so fertile and infertile days can be identified. NFP counselling does not include providing medical, psychological or spiritual advice.

NFP counselling can be dispensed to individuals or couples, or else to small groups (no more than four women or couples). NFP counselling is carried out for the duration of approximately three menstrual cycles. Its procedures are described in the commentary to the NFP introduction.

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