

Counseling: The Basics

Who:

Counselors include a variety of mental health practitioners, including psychiatrists (M.D. or D.O. – medical doctors who can prescribe medication, if necessary), psychologists (mostly Ph.D., Psy.D. or Ed.D. – doctoral level professionals with special training in psychological testing), social workers (M.S.W., D.S.W.), marriage and family therapists (often masters-level professionals with MFCC or MFT credential), and others. Be sure that your counselor has the necessary credentials (degree, license, certification or training) to ethically and legally treat you and/or your family – and make sure that you feel comfortable with him or her.

Clients (also known as patients or consumers) include several types of individuals with a range of problems. For example, a child may be referred to a counselor because of difficulties at school or home; a couple may enter counseling to resolve marital issues; a family may seek a counselor's help in dealing with a troubled family member; or an individual may seek treatment for anxiety, depression, physical or sexual abuse, grief issues, drug and alcohol problems, identity concerns, an eating disorder, career issues, relationship concerns, low self-esteem, or any other identified problem.

We all experience problems from time to time and some require professional intervention, because they are too big for us to deal with on our own. Anyone who is having difficulty coping with life's circumstances should consider speaking with a professional who is trained to listen, offer support and information, and provide effective treatment in the form of possible solutions. There are no magic cures. Psychotherapy is hard work and requires motivation and commitment to making positive changes in one's life.

What:

Counseling, or therapy, encompasses a broad range of services depending on an individual's presenting problem. Length of counseling can be brief (only a few sessions) or long-term (several years), or fall somewhere in between. Counseling can be conducted one-on-one (just you and your counselor) or occur in a group setting (counselor and several clients together) or as a family (you and your family members along with the counselor).

There are many types and styles of counseling. The particular type chosen will depend on your problem, your counselor's theoretical training and experience, and your interest. Some common treatment models include cognitive-behavioral,

psychoanalytic, humanistic (e.g., Gestalt), solution-oriented, systems-focused, and eclectic. Some involve much talking and venting of emotions, some place great emphasis on insight, and some are highly experiential. All can be effective when used appropriately.

Activities related to counseling include assessment, psychological testing, and medication.

Assessment, in a general sense, refers to the gathering of historical information in order to accurately diagnose the problem and develop a treatment plan. This will occur to a great degree at the first counseling session – the intake – and continue, albeit to a lesser degree, in future sessions. In a more formal sense, a psychological assessment is a specific process by which the clinician performs an extensive evaluation of a client's situation and level of functioning in order to identify areas of difficulty and strength, so that particular treatment interventions can be recommended and implemented. Oftentimes, these comprehen-

“Avoiding the problem, pretending it doesn't exist, praying for a miracle, wishing for a stroke of luck, and similar non-action techniques will not solve the problem.”

sive formal assessments are conducted in response to a request and referral from an authority source who presents the evaluator with specific questions to be answered. In many of these cases, psychological testing is usually done to help clarify issues.

Psychological testing, usually done to measure cognitive functioning (for example, intelligence) and/or personality characteristics, may be suggested for the purposes of clarifying the problem(s) and assisting with treatment planning. It is oftentimes used with children in order to detect possible learning disabilities so that proper educational assistance can be provided; to screen applicants for very sensitive jobs (for example, police officers); to determine specific areas and degrees of impairment in brain-injured individuals (for example, accident victims) for rehabilitation purposes; and to better understand underlying personality dynamics in clients who seek mental health assistance or who are referred for evaluation by a third party, such as an employer or the court system. Psychological testing is very expensive and time-consuming, and may not be covered by health insurance. As stated earlier, testing is largely done by licensed psychologists.

Medication is often used as an adjunct to counseling. It is not as effective when used alone, because there is so much more to the problem than just the overt symptoms of anxiety, depres-

sion, and/or psychosis that most psychiatric medications aim to reduce. Should medication be recommended, you will be referred to a qualified physician, most likely a psychiatrist, for an evaluation and prescription.

Where:

Counseling takes place in many settings: community mental health centers, group homes, hospitals and clinics, colleges and schools, private practice offices, prisons, and other institutions. To find a location near you, check your local telephone directory or ask your family physician, employer, or school for some names of local agencies and practitioners.

When:

As needed. Possibly now, if an issue is troubling you. Or, maybe later, when there is a problem. It is important to realize when you need help and to ask for it. Seeking help is a sign of strength. It shows that you care about yourself enough to take care of your psychological needs (and all of us have psychological needs).

Common barriers to enrolling in counseling include self-blame and shame, feeling that you are at fault and caused your problems. In fact, the causes of psychological problems are many, and the real challenge is in taking responsibility for your life by admitting that you have a problem and getting help for it. This is true courage. Avoiding the problem, pretending it doesn't exist, praying for a miracle, wishing for a stroke of luck, and similar non-action techniques will not solve the problem. Action and strength are required.

Additionally, we are often expected to show pride and to protect our families by not discussing personal problems with outsiders. While well-intentioned, this serves to further stigmatize the issue and isolates us from people who can help us. All counselors are ethically obligated to keep your information confidential, with the exception of a few legal instances that your counselor should discuss with you. Thus, there is little need to worry that your counselor would divulge your personal information to others without your consent. Just as you should seek help from financial advisors, lawyers, teachers, doctors, clergy and other professionals when needed, you should treat your mental health with the same importance and respect.

Why:

First, for yourself. To live a better life. Because you are important and deserve to be happy. Next, for your family, friends

and others who care about you. Mental health, just as physical health, is a major component of your overall well-being.

The mind, body and spirit work together. Holistically speaking, all need nurturing in order for you to function at your best. Your health covers a broad range of areas; don't neglect any of them.

Recommended readings:

The Consumer's Guide to Psychotherapy by Jack Engler, Ph.D., and Daniel Goleman, Ph.D. (1992). New York: Simon & Shuster.

O, The Oprah Magazine, a monthly personal growth magazine published by Hearst Communications, Inc. in New York.

How:

Ask family members and/or friends for referrals. Word of mouth is a great way to find a competent professional. This is how we tend to find babysitters, auto mechanics, hair stylists, home repair people, etc. Your brothers and sisters want to help you and will likely offer support. You will have greater confidence in your treatment and more hope for a solution if you personally know someone who has had a positive and successful counseling experience.

Get a referral from your family doctor. He or she may know of several counselors in your community through professional contacts and patient disclosures. Depending on your type of health insurance, your doctor's written referral may be required in order for the cost of mental health services to be covered.

See what services are provided through your employer or school. Several companies have an employee assistance program which provides short-term counseling and/or community referrals. Schools either have counselors on location or some means of connecting troubled students and their families to appropriate services in the community.

Look in your local telephone directory under "mental health," "counselors," "psychologists," "social workers," "social services," and similar terms. Call a few practitioners or places of interest and get information before setting up an initial appointment. For life and death emergencies such as suicide or homicide, dial 911 for immediate police response. For non-emergency matters, contact your doctor, counselor or mental health hotline.

(Dr. Sybil L. Holloway is a Psychological Counselor at Bloomsburg University and a freelance writer.)

Copyright © 2003 by Sybil L. Holloway.

May not be reproduced without written permission from the author. Article was published in the October 2003 issue of We magazine (Lancaster, PA).