

Mental Health Counseling: What to Expect?

How do I find a counselor?

There are many ways. You can ask your healthcare provider, doctor or nurse, for a referral. You may ask someone you trust, such as a friend, a relative, or a religious leader. You can check using your insurance in-the network referral list or do an online search using the keywords that match your search. You may also try using www.PsychologyToday.com, which is a popular search mechanism for mental health referrals.

What types of counselors are there?

Counseling can be provided by a psychologist, a counselor, or a social worker. You may get some counseling from a psychiatrist, but it is limited, as psychiatrists' treatment is geared primarily toward medication prescription and management. All these professionals are trained in understanding feelings and behaviors and know ways to help people through difficult times. Some of them may have additional training in a specialty area, such as treatment of attentional problems, depression, anxiety, family therapy, etc.

Who is who in counseling?

Psychiatrist

- A medical doctor (M.D.) who has graduated from a medical school, with extra training in psychiatry. Psychiatrists focus on prescribing medication to treat mental health problems and less on provision of counseling.

Psychologist

- A specialist with a graduate degree, such as Ph.D. or Psy.D., licensed by the state as a Clinical Psychologist. Ph.D. candidates received extensive training in psychological theory and applications and in research methodology, while Psy.D. candidates focus more on clinical application methods. Psychologists provide counseling and also do psychological testing for diagnosis and treatment of mental health issues, learning disabilities, and personality disorders.

Licensed Counselor

- A specialist with an advanced degree, such as M.A. or M.S., licensed by the state as Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) or Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC). Some of them, Licensed Marital Family Therapists (LMFT) have extra training in marriage and family counseling

Social Worker

- A counselor with an advanced degree in social work, such as MSW, who also obtained the state certification as Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW). They provide counseling and also help people connect with other community services.

What happens in sessions?

You get a chance to talk about anything on your mind. Your therapist will listen, ask questions, and not judge you. You may choose to talk about serious things at times, or talk about things that are more casual, depending on your mood and level of comfort.

What kinds of questions will the counselor ask me?

Your first session is about “orientation” and “assessment.” It is about getting to meet you, understand your concerns, and explain the basics of the therapy process. The counselor will explain the procedures related to therapy, such as scheduling appointments, payments, etc., and review confidentiality rules. The counselor will ask about your current life situation, the recent stressors and events, and how you’ve been feeling in the last year. There may be questions about your family and your living situation, your health, work, and friendships. In addition to getting acquainted, the purpose of this meeting is to help your counselor to understand your personal and psychological needs and establish comfort as you are interacting.

After this initial session, your counselor begins guiding you through your personal therapy treatment. It is usually started by formulating a “treatment plan,” anywhere by your 3d session, which includes discussing your goals, desires for the type of help you want to receive, and a plan to achieve these objectives. Your therapist may discuss the projected timelines for your progress and some strategies that will be used in achieving your goals. It is important that you participate in discussing our goals and preferences for treatment, asking questions and giving feedback. As the treatment goals are formulated, you begin the “active treatment phase” of therapy, where you meet with your counselor to work on resolution of your concerns, finding support and gaining coping skills along the way.

The ending phase of therapy is “termination,” when your counseling goals are met, and you feel you no longer learn or make progress in therapy. This stage includes evaluation of your progress, discussing maintenance, prevention, or alternative treatment options.

Some people continue to see their counselors occasionally for “booster sessions.” This is when you seek some additional support and guidance from your counselor in the process of your continuing personal growth.

What should I expect from counseling?

When you decide to start to see a counselor, you should expect to meet with one person who will get to know you well. You build a relationship during your counseling appointments. Most counselors understand that it takes time to get used to someone before you feel you can talk about the more serious things on your mind. It is hard to tell after the first session if you feel comfortable enough with your counselor to talk about things that are important to you, as building a relationship and trust takes time.

Thus, give yourself and your counselor a chance to get to know each other. However, if you still don't feel comfortable talking with your counselor after a few visits, consider choosing a different therapist. It might take a few tries to find a counselor that you like, but don't give up. Since you will be talking about sensitive issues, you deserve to have a counselor with whom you feel safe and comfortable.

How long will counseling last?

The type of help and length of treatment you are offered by your counselor will depend on:

1. The type of your personal concerns, their duration and severity,
2. What you share, your openness and cooperation,
3. The kind of relationship you have with your counselor, the effectiveness of treatment and level of trust you build
4. To what extent you are utilizing and implementing new skills and behaviors outside of your sessions

Some people are helped after only a few sessions (short term therapy) that may last for only a few weeks. While others may need and prefer longer treatment that may last from several months to a few years. When appropriate, family members may attend some of the counseling sessions to provide extra support and to help improve the family relationships.

Counseling lasts different periods of time for different people. Your counselor will work with you to decide how counseling sessions can fit into your schedule. You might meet with your counselor once a week for 45-60 minutes. Sometimes you might choose to meet with your counselor more often: two or more days weekly, or less often, as you and your counselor decide what is best for you. You can continue meeting with your counselor for as long as you need help working out your problems. This could be one week, six weeks, six months, or longer.

Why Should I Go to Counseling?

If you are thinking about whether counseling can help you, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Do you ever feel really sad, frustrated, or lonely?
- Do you feel especially angry, annoyed, or out of control?
- Do you feel very anxious, worried, or guilty?
- Have you experienced some major problems at home, at work, at school, or in your neighborhood?
- Have you noticed changes in the way you sleep, eat, think, or feel about life?
- Is it hard for you to talk about your feelings with family or friends?
- Is your life being negatively affected by how you are feeling?
- Are your personal life, work, or relationships with family and friends more difficult than you think they should be?

If you answered yes to any or some of these questions, then it may be a good idea to talk to a counselor, also known as a therapist.

People go to counseling for many reasons. Counseling can help you better understand your feelings and problems and learn how to more effectively manage your everyday life. Counseling takes place in a confidential setting, meaning that your counselor cannot tell anyone, not even your close family members about your meetings, except as allowed by state and federal law. These exceptions generally include if you are a danger to self or others, instances of abuse or neglect of an elderly or a minor, as defined by state laws.

What else can I do?

In addition to going to individual counseling, there are many activities you can do on your own to help work through difficult feelings and solve problems. You may join a support group, where people with concerns similar to yours meet to discuss different topics, express their concerns, and seek and give support and encouragement. You might want to try talking with a family member, a good friend, or a spiritual leader. You might try writing down your feelings in a journal or diary.

Other things to try are relaxation exercises, listening to music, watching good movies, or exercising. Try to get involved in activities that you are good at: sports, theater, music. Enjoy hobbies such as writing, reading, art, craftwork, etc. The combination of doing the activities you like and talking to a counselor will improve how you feel and make your life much easier in many ways.

GreenPath Clinic serves the counseling needs of individuals of all ages, couples, and families. We are located at 2132 Deep Water Lane Suite, #240 in Naperville, Illinois 60564. Our website is www.GreenPathClinic.com