

How to Choose a Counsellor

Many survivors of sexual assault, sexual abuse, or other types of violence, find counselling to be a helpful part of their recovery process. Counselling can accelerate the relief of distressing symptoms, such as nightmares, flashbacks, and panic attacks, as well as help someone move forward and work through their trauma by learning how to create a sense of safety, decrease any sense of self-blame, trust others again, and participate in life fully. Counselling can provide an opportunity for growth and change that can lead to a happier, more fulfilling future.

The decision to go to counselling can be a difficult one to make for many people. Some people feel that they should be able to deal with their difficulties on their own, or that their problems are not serious enough to warrant counselling. Yet, receiving support and guidance from a professional can be very beneficial and rewarding, and it can speed up the recovery process. It takes a great deal of strength and courage to reach out for support from a counsellor, and knowing what to expect in counselling can help make taking this step a little easier.

What is counselling¹?

There are many forms of counselling, and they vary in their philosophies and approaches. Overall, counselling is a supportive process in which you can:

- Form a trusting and safe relationship in which to explore your experiences, thoughts, feelings, issues or problems;
- Feel listened to and validated, that your experiences, thoughts and feelings matter, and are real;
- Be empowered to take more control in your life;
- Identify your strengths, inner resources, and choices;
- Develop and move towards realistic personal goals;
- Heal the emotional effects of sexual violence or other trauma;
- Gain valuable information and awareness about issues affecting your life;
- Develop strategies to enjoy life, have fulfilling relationships, and become more resilient to problems that arise in everyday life.

How to find a counsellor

One of the best ways to find a counsellor is to get a referral from an agency that specializes in the particular issue for which you would like to seek counselling.

¹ This definition of counselling has been adapted from the New South Wales Rape Crisis Centre pamphlet on counselling and choosing a counsellor

For example, at the U of A Sexual Assault Centre, you could receive a referral for long-term counselling with a counsellor who specializes in sexual abuse or sexual assault. We have the names of several counsellors and agencies that have provided counselling to our clients, and who we have received positive feedback about.

Another option is to call the Alberta Psychologists' Association (APA) referral line. This service provides you with the names and numbers of three chartered psychologists, and you can specify the area of the city you would like your counsellor's office to be in, the gender of the counsellor, and their areas of specialty. For example, you can call and ask for referrals to female counsellors on the South Side of Edmonton that work with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The APA referral line number in Edmonton is: 428-8255, and province-wide is: 1-888-424-0297.

Choosing a counsellor

One of the most important factors that leads to success in counselling is having a positive, trusting relationship with your counsellor. If you are not comfortable with your counsellor, you will not be able to achieve the potential benefits of counselling. This is why it is important to choose your counsellor very carefully. While it might take a few tries to find someone that you are truly comfortable with, this will save time in the long run because your counselling will be far more productive.

When considering what a good match with a counsellor might be for you, consider:

- Can I afford this person's fee? Do they have a sliding scale fee for students or lower income clients?
- Would I be more comfortable seeing a female or male counsellor? Does it make a difference to me?
- Is it important to me to have a counsellor with a particular religious background? Or experience working with individuals from my religion or culture?
- Is it important to me to have a counsellor with a background working with individuals from my community (e.g. the GLBT community)?
- Can I easily get to this person's office for appointments?
- Do I have any specific accessibility needs (due to language barriers or disability)?

When you call to make an appointment

Once you have chosen one or more counsellors that you would like to meet with, you can call to make an appointment. Usually you will get an answering machine

or a receptionist; rarely will the counsellor answer her/his phone. When leaving a message for a counsellor all you need to say is:

- your name
- who you want to set up an appointment with
- who referred you
- your phone number
- when you can be reached most easily
- if it is okay or not to leave a message for you at that number

When the counsellor calls you back you will probably only discuss the details of setting up the first appointment. The counsellor may ask you a few questions, but usually they will leave that entirely for the first session. Please note: be very clear with the counsellor if there is anything that is urgent, such as experiencing suicidal feelings or feeling you are in crisis, so that the counsellor can try to schedule your appointment as soon as possible. Otherwise, it is common for your first appointment to be booked two weeks away or longer.

Be sure to ask the counsellor what the price is for the first session and what types of payment options are available (e.g. cash, cheque, visa, etc.)

Your first session

The first session with a counsellor is as much an opportunity for the counsellor to see how s/he will be able to assist you, as it is for you to assess whether or not this is someone that you will be comfortable seeing. You will be asked to talk about what has brought you to counselling, what your current problems and symptoms are, your personal and family history (if relevant), and what you hope to achieve through therapy. This first session is considered an intake session.

After answering the counsellor's questions and talking about your current concerns, your counsellor should indicate whether or not s/he will be able to help you and suggest a plan to do this. S/he should discuss how many appointments you will need to reach your goals, how often these appointments should be, and what types of techniques she/he may use during therapy.

Your counsellor should be very clear about the confidentiality of what you say in counselling, the fees for each session, any potential negative effects of treatment, your rights as a client in therapy, and the boundaries that exist in your counsellor/client relationship.

While most counsellors will be very clear about these things, the following are some questions that you might want to ask to assure that you are both well informed of what therapy will consist of and how comfortable you are with this person:

- What is your training, experience, and/or areas of specialization?

- Have you worked with survivors of sexual assault before?
- How much does each session cost?
- What is your cancellation policy? Do you charge for missed appointments?
- What techniques/approaches do you use? How might these be helpful to me?
- For gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered clients: Have you worked with GLBT clients? What is your knowledge of the GLBT community?
- For religious clients: Have you worked with clients from my particular religion? What is your knowledge of my religion?
- For clients of a particular cultural background: Have you worked with clients with my background? What do you know of my culture?

Questions to ask yourself after your session with a counsellor:

Once you have met with a counsellor, consider how you felt with them. Is this someone that you would like to continue seeing for therapy? It might take you awhile to feel completely comfortable with a counsellor, but consider if this is someone who you think you would eventually be comfortable with. If you are unsure how you feel, consider asking yourself some of the following questions:

1. Did I feel comfortable with this person?
2. Did I feel respected?
3. Did I feel that my feelings were validated?
4. Did I feel safe in the session?
5. Did the counsellor's manner put me at ease? Was I comfortable with her/his style?
6. Am I comfortable with the treatment plan that the counsellor proposed?
7. Was she/he empathetic or caring?

Trust your judgement and your sense of comfort. If you met with a few different counsellors, choose the one who put you the most at ease.

Signs the counsellor you are working with will be helpful or not²:

You are working with a good counsellor if she/he:

- believes you that you were sexually assaulted
- knows that the sexual assault was not your fault
- shares information with you about the healing process after sexual assault or abuse
- fully respects your feelings (grief, anger, rage, sadness, despair, joy)
- does not force you to do anything that you don't want to do

² Adapted from information in a pamphlet created by the Hamilton Sexual Assault Centre

- acknowledges and respects cultural and religious differences, and doesn't use your cultural or racial background to excuse violence of any sort
- encourages you to do things that will be helpful to you in your healing journey (such as joining a support group, expressing feelings, or journaling)
- will not have a relationship with you other than one that is appropriate for counsellors and clients (e.g. will never have a sexual relationship with you, will not have a friendship with you)
- encourages you to build a support system outside of counselling
- encourages you to take care of yourself and brainstorms with you ways for you to practice self care
- over time helps you develop coping techniques and skills to heal and grow on your own
- respects your choices

The counsellor you are working with will not be helpful to you if she/he:

- sometimes puts down your experiences or the pain that they've caused you
- avoids hearing the "worst" experiences that you have to talk about
- focuses on the abuser, not you
- pushes you to forgive the abuser
- wants a friendship outside of counselling
- talks about her/his personal problems
- won't discuss problems that occur between the two of you in the counselling relationship
- excuses the behaviour of the abuser or other abusers

You are the expert on what you need through your healing process, and this includes knowing who is best able to help you. Trust your feelings when choosing a counsellor. If you do not feel that your counsellor is helpful, or if you are uncomfortable with your counsellor, consider asking for another referral from an agency such as the U of A Sexual Assault Centre.

While counselling is not a necessary step in every person's recovery process, the additional support and guidance that counselling provides can help you heal more quickly and feel less alone through the process. Please remember that whether you choose to do counselling or not, you are the person that will do the emotional processing necessary to heal yourself. Your counsellor can walk beside you on the healing journey, and can facilitate your healing, but cannot do the work for you. As in any recovery process, there may be some very frustrating moments and there will be some very rewarding ones as well. Give yourself credit for all the strides you make, and be patient and gentle with yourself through the process.