

What is counseling and is it for me?

Counseling or psychotherapy is a term used for a variety of “talk therapies”. A person may consider counseling when (s) he is “stuck” and can’t understand why (s) he feels so angry, blue or afraid. A counselor may help a person figure out why a particular behavior isn’t working or how “to help learn and practice more effective ways to think.” (*Harvard Women’s Health Watch* 10/04) Counseling offers the opportunity to gain understanding of a particular mental health problem. Or it can offer assistance when a person is faced with a challenging situation. Some people enter into counseling with the hope of becoming more satisfied with their life.

Whatever the reason for beginning counseling, each person must find the right therapist - a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker or mental health counselor. You can ask your primary care physician, family or friends to recommend a therapist. Some therapists will offer you one meeting at no charge so you can determine if you feel comfortable with the counselor. If you decide to pursue therapy, it may be covered by your health insurance. Health insurance policies vary so it’s important to check with yours to determine the coverage and any limitations. Please note that health insurance will only cover licensed providers.

Initially the therapist will ask questions about your personal and family history. The counselor will ask what issues you want to address in therapy. Some issues could be depression, sleeping or eating problems, abuse of alcohol or drugs, anxiety, interpersonal conflict or reaction to medical illness. You and your therapist will work together to articulate realistic goals. “Talk therapy” is a process by which a therapist supports a client in exploring a particular problem, decreasing a particular symptom, reducing negative experiences or increasing mastery of one’s present and future. Some therapists favor a particular approach (psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, group or family) or may recommend a particular type of therapy for you. What is most important is not the name or title of the therapeutic approach, but the rapport that develops between the client and the therapist.

After seeing a therapist for a number of sessions, she may suggest that you see a psychiatrist for a psychopharmacology evaluation to see if you might benefit from medication. Medication may be used in conjunction with the counseling sessions. It is important that you bring a complete list of all medications including “Over-the-counter” ones to your meeting with the psychiatrist to prevent any adverse drug interactions.

In summary, psychotherapy is a way to talk about emotional issues which may be causing you distress. Once identified, it is up to you to change how you view yourself and your life or change how you behave. Therapy is a venue to seek solutions to psychological problems by gaining understanding or insight into what makes you “tick”.