



THE CENTER FOR MIGHTY MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES

Helping You Choose a Counselor or Therapist...

There are times when personal, work, or family problems make it hard to enjoy life. Maybe you're having trouble sleeping or concentrating at work. Perhaps you and your spouse are arguing more, or your child is eating poorly or seems "down." Whether your concerns are recent or long-term, sometimes problems are too difficult to handle alone. There are many different reasons that you or a family member may seek professional counseling.

What is counseling?

The words counseling, therapy, and psychotherapy are often used to describe the same process. Whatever term you use, counseling is a process that usually involves a series of discussions with a trained professional who can help you identify your feelings or problems, talk about them, and find ways to cope with or solve them. During the counseling process, you may discover patterns of thinking and behaving that you want to keep or change. You are really retaining the time and expertise of a specialist who can help you understand more about who you are and how you can make changes in yourself or your life. Counseling and therapy can occur individually, with another person, with a family, in a group, or in a combination of these. Therapists working with couples often see the individuals separately as well as together. When working with families, they may see individuals, the parents, other combinations of family members, or the whole family together.

The different kinds of counselors and therapists

Most health insurance companies categorize what they refer to as "licensed mental health providers" in a number of different ways. In order to be state licensed, a therapist or counselor must have received a master's or doctoral degree, completed a specific number of hours of counseling, and passed a standardized test. Some types of counselors are more affordable than others. However, most states do not require a license to be a counselor, especially clergy.

Pastors may or may not have received formal training in counseling.

Board Certified Christian Counselors are Christian counselors (many who are also clergy) with advanced degrees in counseling and certified by the Board of Christian Professional and Pastoral Counselors.

Pastoral counselors are members of the clergy who have specialized training in psychotherapy.

Social workers generally have a master's degree in clinical social work. They usually have training in how the community or society can affect people's relationships and feelings of security. Most social workers also have experience in helping with family problems. Social workers are able to provide individual, family, and group counseling. Many specialize in a particular area, such as addictions, or children's, women's, or couple's issues.

Marriage and family therapists/counselors generally have a master's or doctoral degree in psychology, education, social work, or marriage and family therapy. They usually focus more on practical counseling and are trained to deal with personal relationships and family and couple conflicts. They address the individual's roles and needs within relationships as well as the impact of the family legacy upon current relationships.

Mental health counselors also have a master's or doctoral degree in psychology or education. They are the newest group of providers to be licensed, and a few states still do not have licensing requirements for them. As with many counselors or therapists, some mental health counselors specialize in helping people cope with a particular problem, such as grief, drug or alcohol abuse, or post-traumatic stress. Others may focus on a particular area, such as educational or religious counseling.

Psychologists may have a master's degree, but usually have a doctoral degree in psychology, education, or social science. Psychologists are specially trained to use psychological and educational testing to aid in identifying and resolving problems. Like other types of counselors, they work in many settings, including mental health centers, hospitals and clinics, schools, employee assistance programs, and private practice. Although they are required to have extensive training, psychologists do not go to medical school. In a few states, you may find some psychologists who are licensed to prescribe some psychiatric medications.

Psychiatrists are licensed medical doctors (M.D.s) who are specially trained to study, diagnose, and treat a patient's mental and physical condition. They often work as part of a team with other mental health professionals. Psychiatrists may use different counseling approaches, including family and group therapy. They often prescribe and manage medication, depending on the needs of the client; and, for some psychiatrists, this is their primary role in working with the client. They often address people with more severe problems and collaborate with primary care physicians as well as counselors and therapists on implementing and managing a medication regimen for clients. Their services are usually covered by health insurance. Psychiatrists are able to hospitalize patients. In most states, they are the only therapists who can prescribe medications.

Choosing a counselor or therapist

Counseling is a highly personal process, and the match between a counselor or therapist and a client is highly personal, too. As a potential client, the more information you have, the easier it can be to make the right match.

There is no question that a potential counselor's training, background, and approach are important. Some therapists may specialize in treating women, men, children, teenagers, couples, or families. Others may focus on different issues, such as aging, grief, or substance abuse. There are many different kinds of counseling theories and psychotherapy treatments -- some explore past experiences and unconscious motivation, whereas others may emphasize behavior, learning processes, and surroundings. For specific problems, certain techniques may be more effective than others. A good therapist should know when to select a particular approach to treat a specific problem.

Even more important, however, is the way you feel about a therapist or counselor. You want to find someone who seems genuine, caring, and interested in helping you. Here are some things to keep in mind when choosing a counselor:

Choose someone you like and feel that you will be able to trust. Research clearly shows that the relationship and rapport between the counselor and client are more important than the therapist's

training, background, and approach. So when you're choosing a counselor or therapist, ask yourself these questions: "Do I like this person? Is he or she easy to talk with? Does he or she understand what I'm trying to say?"

Advocate for yourself. Don't be afraid to ask questions that will help you decide whether you and the therapist share a similar sense of values. Think about whether you'd be comfortable discussing your problems and concerns with this person. The questions listed further on in this article may help.

Be prepared to tell the therapist something about yourself and your life. Then decide how you feel about the response. Remember it is OK not to reveal too much in your first meeting. Trust is built upon experience with another person.

It is very important to find out whether the therapist or counselor is covered by your health insurance plan or has a sliding fee scale based on income. Be sure to find out if your insurance limits you to certain types of providers.

Remember that just because a psychiatrist, counselor, or therapist is more expensive or has more credentials than another, it does not necessarily mean that she is the best choice. Just as doctors, teachers, master plumbers, and hairdressers are not all equally talented, neither are all counselors or therapists; some are better at their art than others. It is OK to be picky about whom you are going to work with on the challenges that you are facing.

Recognize that your right to privacy is limited if you choose to go through your insurance company. Any insurance company will have the right to audit your records and receive reports from the counselor or therapist and will be able to control the frequency and number of sessions that you may have with your therapist, if it is paying for the services. That said, all counselors, military and civilian, are tasked with safeguarding client confidentiality within the confines of mandated safety and security-threat disclosures. Many people choose to pay out of pocket, using a counselor or therapist who has a sliding fee scale in order to avoid giving insurance providers access to their files. While it may involve a little more searching on your part, there are many counselors and therapists who are willing to work with individuals by charging reasonable fees and spacing sessions, whenever possible, to help their clients manage the cost of counseling.

Where to look for a counselor or therapist

Doctors, clergy, and school counselors may be familiar with counselors and therapists in your local community.

Family members and friends whose opinions you trust might be able to recommend someone. However, if a close friend or family member is currently seeing that counselor or therapist or may need to return to that therapist, you may want to ask the counselor or therapist to provide a referral to someone else in order to ensure that no boundaries are crossed and that your confidentiality is not inadvertently broken.

Questions to ask the counselor or therapist

Once you've identified a few possible therapists, you can use the following questions to help you make your decision. You might ask the therapist or counselor the following:

Do you specialize in treating people with concerns like mine?

How much experience have you had treating people with problems like mine?

What particular training do you have in this area?

Are you licensed to practice in this state?

Who will participate in the counseling (my child, my spouse, the whole family, only me)?

How frequent will the sessions be?

What are your hours? Are you available evenings, weekends, or for extra sessions?

How much will this cost?

What are the repercussions for missing sessions due to illness or other emergencies?

What happens if I decide I want to stop?

What therapeutic approaches and techniques do you use?

Have you treated people of my ethnic or cultural background before? People of my age and gender?

Would you be comfortable providing a referral if, after a reasonable period of time, I feel little progress has been made?

In an emergency, is there a procedure for reaching you?

How long do you expect counseling to last?

When talking with the counselor or therapist, ask yourself these questions:

Do I like this person?

Is this someone I feel comfortable with?

Do I think the counselor understands my situation?

Do I feel that the counselor is optimistic about my ability to resolve my issues?

What about children?

Sometimes children might need counseling or an evaluation to help with behavior problems, depression, school problems, or family conflicts. In some cases, counseling might be part of a preventive treatment to help deal with illness, death, or divorce. Therapists who work with children often use play and toys to help younger children communicate problems in their lives, and may ask a parent to be actively involved in a child's therapy. Depending on the

situation, a child might meet with a counselor or therapist individually, in a group with other children or siblings, or with a whole family. Parents (especially parents of preschool children) are often involved at some point in counseling to help children deal more effectively with the situation. Children under 14 years of age benefit greatly from the involvement of their parents or caretaker, since these are the people in their lives who will need to reinforce what is gained through counseling and often are needed to help manage behavior changes. A counselor cannot "fix" a child or her behavior, but can help parents and children learn new behaviors and build strong, healthy family relationships.

We would be honored to help in any way we can.
Whether or not you allow us to help you, we hope you get the help you want and need.
Hope and help are available!

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www.mightymarriages.org