

# How to Choose a Counsellor

Many survivors of sexual assault, sexual abuse, or other forms 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, counselling can help someone move forward, work through trauma by learning how to create a sense of safety, decrease self-blame, learn to trust others again, and participate in life. Moreover, counselling can propel opportunities for growth and change that can lead to a happier, more fulfilling future.

The decision to seek counselling can be a difficult one to make for many people. Some 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. And yet, receiving support and guidance from a professional can be beneficial and rewarding. It takes a great deal of strength and courage to ask for help and reach out for support from a counsellor. Thankfully, knowing what to expect in counselling can help make taking this step a little easier.

## What is Counselling?

There are many forms of counselling, and each counsellor may vary in their philosophies and approaches<sup>1</sup>. Overall, counselling is a supportive process in which you can:

- Form a trusting and safe relationship to better 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. 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.

Another option is to call the Psychologists' Association of Alberta (PAA) referral line. This

service provides you with the names and numbers of three chartered psychologists where 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 (e.g., requesting a referral to female counsellors who work with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, with offices located in southside Edmonton). For more information, contact PAA in Edmonton at 780-428-8255, or province-wide at 1-888-424-0297.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the New South Wales Rape Crisis Centre pamphlet.

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## Choosing a Counsellor

One of the most important factors that lead 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 you might have to meet with several counsellors to find someone that you are comfortable with, this will save you and your counsellor time in the long run because your counselling will be more productive.

## Questions to Consider When Deciding on a Counselor

Choosing the counsellor you want to work with can be a bit of a challenge. There are a lot of key things to consider, including their speciality, personality, and availability.

In answering some of the following questions, you can narrow your own must-haves and select a counsellor that meets your needs:

- Can I afford the fees associated with this counsellor? Do they have a sliding scale fee for students or lower income clients?
- Will 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 who has experience working with individuals from my religion or culture?
- Does the counsellor need to have a background working with individuals from my community (e.g. sexual minority or First Nations community)?
- Can I easily get to this person's office for appointments?
- Do I have any specific accessibility needs (e.g., communication, physical)?

## Booking an appointment

Once you have chosen one or more counsellors you would like to meet, you can call to make an appointment. Usually you will get an answering machine or a receptionist; rarely will the counsellor answer their phone.

When leaving a message for a counsellor, remember to provide the following information:

- Your name and the name of the counsellor you want to book an appointment with
- Who referred you (e.g., doctor, U of A Sexual Assault Centre)
- Your phone number and when you can be reached most easily
- If it is okay for the office to leave a voicemail at the number you are calling from

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## Booking an appointment *continued*

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 for the first session. **Important note:** be very clear with the counsellor if there is anything that is urgent (e.g., if you are 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 to wait anywhere from two weeks or longer for your first appointment. Also, 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

This first session is considered an intake session and is an opportunity for the counsellor to see how they will be able to assist you, and for you to assess whether or not this is someone you will be comfortable seeing. You will be asked to talk about what 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. After answering the counsellor's questions and talking about your current concerns, your counsellor should indicate whether or not they will be able to help you and suggest a plan to do this. They should discuss how many appointments you will need to reach your goals, how often these appointments should be, and what types of techniques they may use during therapy.

Your counsellor should be very clear about the confidentiality of what you say in counselling, the fees for each session, the 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 general questions you might want to ask the counsellor:

- 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 more specific questions related to sexuality, culture, and/or religion, refer to the following examples:

- **For members of the LGBTQ2SIA+ community:**  
Have you worked with members of my community before? What is your training or experience with the LGBTQ2SIA+ community?
- **For clients of a particular cultural background:**  
Have you worked with clients with my background? What do you know of my culture?
- **For religious clients:** Have you worked with clients from my particular religion? What is your knowledge of my religion?

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## Questions to ask yourself after your session with a counsellor

It might take you a while to feel completely comfortable with a counsellor, but it's important to consider if this is someone you would be comfortable speaking to. Reflect on how you felt around them, and if they are someone you want to continue seeing for therapy?

If you are unsure how you feel, ask yourself some of the following questions:

- Did I feel comfortable with this person?
- Did I feel respected?
- Were my feelings validated?

- Did I feel safe in the session?
- Did the counsellor's manner put me at ease? Was I comfortable with their style?
- Do I agree with the treatment plan that the counsellor proposed? Am I comfortable with this approach?
- Was the counsellor empathetic or caring?

Remember to trust your judgement and your sense of comfort. If you met with a few different counsellors, choose the one who makes you most comfortable.

## Signs the Counsellor You are Working With Will be Helpful<sup>2 3 4</sup>

You are working with a good counsellor if they:

- Believe your experience without question, and know that the experience was not your fault.
- Share information with you about the therapeutic process and seem competent in their knowledge around sexual assault and sexual violence.
- Respect your feelings (e.g., grief, anger, rage, sadness, despair, joy).
- Explain the processes, modalities, and techniques they are using, and obtain your informed consent throughout the therapeutic relationship.
- Acknowledge and respect cultural and religious differences, and seek to learn more if there are gaps in their knowledge.
- Respect your choices and maintain appropriate boundaries.
- Remains focused on you during the therapeutic process and do not conduct business during your sessions beyond what is necessary.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from information in a pamphlet created by the Hamilton Sexual Assault Centre

<sup>3</sup> Crossing, K. "50 Signs of Good Therapy," GoodTherapy. (January 2012): accessed August 13, 2019, <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/50-signs-good-therapy-0110119>.

<sup>4</sup> Rubinstein, N. "50 Warning Signs of Questionable Therapy and Counseling," GoodTherapy. (February 2008): accessed August 13, 2019, <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/warning-signs-of-bad-therapy>.

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## Signs the Counsellor You are Working with Will Not be Helpful<sup>5 6</sup>

The counsellor you are working with will not be helpful to you if they:

- Do not have specific training in the area of sexual violence you require.
- Avoid exploring certain experiences of emotions with you.
- Judge your choices related to how your lifestyle (e.g., how you cope and behave).
- Seek to develop a relationship with you outside of therapy and do not maintain professional boundaries.
- Talk about their personal problems.
- Focus specifically on the diagnosis.
- Refuse to discuss problems that occur between the two of you in the counselling relationship.
- Excuse the behaviour of the individual who caused you harm.

**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 (e.g., U of A Sexual Assault Centre.)

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

<sup>5</sup> Crossing, K. "50 Signs of Good Therapy," GoodTherapy. (January 2012): accessed August 13, 2019, <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/50-signs-good-therapy-0110119>.

<sup>6</sup> Rubinstein, N. "50 Warning Signs of Questionable Therapy and Counseling," GoodTherapy. (February 2008): accessed August 13, 2019, <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/warning-signs-of-bad-therapy>.