

## Counsellors

Counselling is working out your personal problems with the help of a trained professional. The counsellor helps you to resolve your problems in a positive way by helping you to clarify the issues, explore options, develop strategies and increase self-awareness.

Everything you discuss with the counsellor is confidential, except in a small number of specific cases, such as where the counsellor is required by law to report a crime.

Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek counselling. Common personal concerns include relationship difficulties, grief, difficult life circumstances, anxiety and depression. If you would like to have counselling, you can:

- Ask your doctor for a recommendation.
- Contact your local community health centre.
- Look up the National Register of Psychotherapists and Counsellors provided by the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia.

### Counselling versus psychotherapy

Counselling usually refers to short-term treatment for a particular problem, such as marital difficulties. Psychotherapy usually refers to longer-term treatment for complex issues that are having a negative effect on a person's life. There can be considerable overlap between the two approaches, depending on the needs of the client.

### A counsellor is not a psychiatrist

A professional counsellor is not the same as a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who undertook extra training in order to specialise in mental health. A psychiatrist may offer talk-based therapy and can prescribe mood-altering medications to help manage the symptoms of mental illnesses such as severe depression or anxiety.

A counsellor is not a medical doctor and cannot prescribe medication of any kind. A trained counsellor is someone trained to offer a talk-based therapy. There are many different models of talk-based therapy. A counsellor may work in partnership with a medical doctor at times to ensure comprehensive and integrated care.

### Check your counsellor's qualifications

Don't assume that all counsellors are professionally qualified. There is no law in Australia that requires a person who provides a counselling service to have either qualifications or experience. This means that people without training or skills can call themselves counsellors or psychotherapists.

PACFA is the peak professional body that provides national standards for the profession. Trained counselling professionals may include psychiatrists and psychologists who have counselling or psychotherapy training, and members of the professional associations linked with PACFA.

A trained counsellor has usually spent three or more years studying counselling at university, often at postgraduate level, or has an equivalent level of training in other accredited higher education institutions.

#### Questions to ask

Before committing yourself to a particular counsellor:

- Ask for proof of their specialist training.

- Find out how long they have been practising as a counsellor.
- Ask about their main fields of interest.
- Ask for an estimate of fees. Some counsellors (for example, those who work in universities or community health centres) may be free, or may charge very low fees. Others may charge anywhere from \$40 to \$140 (or more) per hour. Keep in mind that the price may have no bearing on the quality of service. You can only claim counselling fees on Medicare if referred by your GP. You may be eligible for a partial rebate on your private health insurance, depending on your policy.

## The first counselling session

Your first session will help you to decide whether this counsellor is the right one for you. Questions to ask yourself include:

- Do I feel comfortable?
- Am I able to talk freely about deeply personal thoughts and emotions?
- Is the counsellor paying attention to me?
- Do I feel they understand and respect me?
- Can I envisage seeing this person on a regular basis?

If you decide that the counsellor isn't right for you, don't go back. You are under no obligation to continue seeing a counsellor if you aren't comfortable with them.

## Number of sessions

It is reasonable to ask the counsellor at the end of the first session for an estimate of how many sessions they think you will need. However, remember that this is only an estimate. Some problems can be successfully resolved within a few sessions. In other cases, talking about the particular problem with the counsellor may bring up deeper, unresolved issues that need further exploration.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Lifeline Tel. 131 114
- Mental Health Foundation Tel. (03) 9826 1422
- PACFA Register of Psychotherapists and Counsellors

## Things to remember

- Counselling is not limited to people with mental health problems – anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek counselling.
- Typically, a trained counsellor has spent between three and six years studying counselling, psychotherapy and/or psychology at the university level.
- You are under no obligation to continue seeing a counsellor if you aren't comfortable with them.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Relationships Australia Victoria

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