
Counsellors

Summary

- Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek counselling.
 - A trained counsellor has usually studied counselling, psychotherapy or psychology at university level for between three and six years.
 - You do not have to continue seeing a counsellor if you are not comfortable with them.
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We all experience personal challenges or issues in our lives. We can deal with these times by talking to friends or family, or trying to deal with things ourselves. There are times, however, when issues are too much for us to manage on our own, or cannot be resolved by support from our friends or family. At such times, seeking support and strategies from a professional such as a counsellor can be helpful.

What is counselling?

A counsellor is a trained, objective professional with whom you can build a healing and trusting relationship. They are trained to offer different types of assistance; most frequently talking-based styles of therapy.

Counselling is a process of talking about and working through your personal problems with a counsellor. The counsellor helps you to address your problems in a positive way by helping you to clarify the issues, explore options, develop strategies and increase self-awareness. For some people, just the process of telling their story to a counsellor, and being listened to, is helpful.

A trained counsellor is someone trained to offer a talk-based therapy. There are many different types of talk-based therapy. A counsellor may work in partnership with a medical doctor or other health professional at times to give comprehensive and integrated care.

Counselling provides confidential support. This means that everything you discuss with the counsellor is private, between you and the counsellor. The exception is when a counsellor has a duty of care to report something that threatens your wellbeing or the wellbeing of others. This legal requirement will be explained to you in your first counselling session.

There are many different types of counselling and approaches that counsellors use will vary.

Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek counselling. No issue is too big or too small to ask for support. Common issues that people seek counselling for include:

- grief and loss
- communication and relationships issues
- work and career issues
- stress, anxiety and depression
- life transitions such as the birth of a new baby, separation, divorce or the death of a family member or friend
- parenting
- addiction
- abuse
- trauma
- self-esteem difficulties
- exploring their gender identity and/or sexuality.

Other types of talk-based therapy

Psychotherapy also uses talk-based therapy to treat clients. There can be a lot of overlap between counselling and **psychotherapy**, depending on the needs of the person.

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who has extra training specialising 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.

Professional qualifications of a counsellor

Do not 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.

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 another accredited higher education institution.

There are two peak bodies that provide national standards for psychotherapists or counsellors in Australia – the **Australian Counselling Association (ACA)** and the **Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA)**.

It is important that you find a counsellor with the appropriate training and experience who suits you and your needs, and whom you feel comfortable with.

Questions to ask when choosing a counsellor

When choosing a counsellor, it is a good idea to find out the following:

- what approach the counsellor will take
- whether they are accredited by a professional body
- how many sessions clients of the counsellor typically attend
- what the counsellor's main fields of interest and experience are
- proof of their specialist training
- how long they have been working as a counsellor
- an estimate of their 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 \$150 (or more) per hour. Keep in mind that the price may have no bearing on the quality of service.

Not all counsellors have the same approach and you may need to try more than one counsellor to find one that best suits your needs.

Is counselling covered by Medicare?

Some counsellors are covered under a Medicare rebate and you may get your session covered under Medicare or pay a small gap fee. To be entitled to a Medicare rebate you must get a **mental health care plan** from your doctor. This means your doctor will assess, through a questionnaire and knowledge of you, whether you would benefit from mental health support.

A mental health care plan provides you with up to 10 sessions of counselling per year with a Medicare rebate.

Medicare does not provide rebates for all counsellors. You need to ask the individual counsellor. 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?

- Has the counsellor discussed a plan with me about how we will manage my issues or concerns?

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 counselling 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 in 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 **GP (doctor)**
- Your local community health centre
- Your school or university
- Your workplace human resources
- Religious organisations
- **Relationships Australia** – provides counselling, mediation, dispute resolution, relationship and parenting skills education, community support, employee assistance programs and professional training. Services and programs are available nationally Tel. **1300 364 277**
- **Lifeline** Tel. **13 11 14** (24 hours, 7 days)
- **Beyond Blue** Tel. **1300 22 4636**
- **Australia Counselling Directory**
- **Australian Counselling Association** Tel. **1300 784 333**
- **Mental Health Association of Australia (Victoria)** Tel. **(03) 9427 0406**
- **Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA)** – register of psychotherapists and counsellors Tel. **(03) 9486 3077**

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

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