

Voices: Counseling: What does it mean to ‘get help?’

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Self-help articles are everywhere, discussing anxiety, depression, substance abuse, addictions and more. In every instance, the reader is urged to “seek help,” because no one knows how serious a disorder is or could become, and in most cases, it will cause personal suffering and have an effect on others.

Counseling or getting medical help from the family physician is a great idea. Better to err on the side of caution than not.

Most of us are used to medical doctors taking our vitals and ordering tests and medications. A medical doctor can fix what is wrong.

However, emotional and psychological maladies may be less clear-cut. We may believe the Bible and prayer can cure our ills. When that doesn’t always happen, we may become more fearful.

In my case (Ruth), panic attacks affected my heart rate so much that I landed in the emergency room with a quick EKG and echocardiogram to follow. Referral to counselors, even a bio-feedback technician, followed that. Things happened fast, and I realized it is wise to educate oneself about psychological counseling and be open to it should the need arise.

Can we trust a counselor? Will they do any good? What can we expect if we go for a session or take our loved one? Will a counselor help me?

The role of a counselor

Counselors are trained to recognize symptoms and develop a diagnostic overview, which can be supported factually through diagnostic criteria. Various treatment theories may be used, the best ones corresponding to the particular problem with positive effect. Skilled counselors utilize several theories.

Counselors are active listeners, attuned to the client without judgment and withholding direct advice. They may repeat the client's statements back to him or her to show careful understanding. Misunderstanding then can be corrected.

When I (Ruth) was in counseling, the first great relief to me was having a trained person present inside my illness with me. I had been so alone, then amazingly, there was someone who had seen other people like me and was my advocate in survival. From that first moment with my counselor, I had hope.

The practice of counseling

Counselors listen to the client and ask questions—some therapists are more directive than others—leading to insights about feelings and the overall problem at hand.

Sometimes focusing on the past—early relationships, trauma or abuse—is helpful and brings gradual relief. We may feel worse before we feel better as experiences and emotions are brought to the surface. We may feel angry or more energetic, and these should be monitored by our counselor and physician.

As we seek answers, we need a safe place to share about ourselves and find comfort.

The day I (Ruth) realized it was OK to be imperfect, to be emotionally honest, to assign responsibility to those who hurt me and then forgive was a very happy day for me. But all that surely did not happen all in one day.

Progress in therapy may seem gradual. We may walk out of a session with no clear direction, but truths and realizations come to us between sessions, through the Holy Spirit.

Breakthroughs come in prayer and preaching and through Scripture, reading, dreams and conversations with other people. With the brain and spirit, all of life works together—memory with present thought.

As for the duration of counseling, insurance companies might initially allow six sessions with a therapist then update after that. Diagnosis leads to protocols with specific session numbers. No reputable counselor overtreats. Treatment plans are carefully monitored.

Confidentiality of counseling

Clients can expect confidentiality from the counselor. However, there are some exceptions: child or elder abuse, the client's danger to self or others, and when litigation demands confidential information be revealed. Laws vary among states. An attorney should be consulted for any legal questions.

A client reads and signs an informed consent document before beginning sessions. This important document may provide the counselor's credentials, address of the state professional counseling board, the goals and benefits, risks and methods of or approaches to counseling, testing and reports, and limits of confidentiality. This can be an important, if lengthy, form that outlines the responsibilities of the counselor and client.

How do we know when we are better?

We are better when we are able to accept our situation and develop coping skills to handle symptoms. Symptoms could subside dramatically, or most likely become milder and more manageable. An important job of counselors is helping develop a strong coping plan, using reliable psychological techniques. Medication may or may not be part of the strategy.

I (Ruth) learned, when medication reduced my anxiety and depression to a less overwhelming state, cognitive techniques began to work. Sadly, before I had medication, nothing helped. Medication, along with the presence and skill of my therapist, gave me hope.

Hope builds atop hope. Each small success is the foundation for the next brave attempt to live and grow.

We are spiritual beings

For Christians, a Christian counselor will be beneficial in understanding how our faith is affected by emotional and chemical imbalances. Clients need assurance of God's love and tender care in illness, even if we are angry and fearful, even if we exhibit "sinful" behavior. God is our healer.

Many factors determine mental health. Humans differ in temperament, genetics and physical make up; past experiences like parenting, abuse, trauma; also, mental health education and opportunity for treatment.

God never requires us to be perfect in ourselves, but that we be made righteous through Christ in faith and salvation. He never requires us to be like everybody else, but to model our lives after Jesus.

We can be gentle with ourselves in our suffering and learn to be our unique selves in God's peace.

A counselor can model Jesus for us as he or she stands alongside us and prays for us.

My (Ruth) counselors indeed were ministers to me. When I went to counseling, I received help from a well-trained, skillful clinician who knew God. I received and accepted my diagnosis and learned coping skills like self-talk, visualization and deep breathing.

I lost my fear of dying from panic attacks and won my life back, becoming a more mature person in the process. I became more confident in every area of life through more fully trusting God. Trusting really does grow through difficult experiences.

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