

Information About Counselling and Psychotherapy

What is counselling?

Counselling is a process which involves the helping skills of caring, listening and reflecting. It is based on listening to the client and a trusting relationship between the client and counsellor. A counsellor will be supportive but give little or no direct advice since the aim of counselling is to help us to develop insight into our own problems. They help us re-find our own resources from within and so enable us to approach our lives and problems in a fresh way.

The counselling relationship is used to explore personal problems, to enable us to make sense of our unhappiness. By getting to know ourselves we can understand our feelings and motives better and this can reduce anxiety, lessen compulsiveness and ease depression. One of the main aims of counselling is to guide us from feeling like victims of circumstances to feeling we have some control over our lives. So in the course of counselling we can reassess our coping skills – how we deal with problems, challenges, relationships, work – and learn ways that are more effective. Counselling also looks at how we communicate with each other, guiding us to be more clear and direct – saying what we mean and asking for what we want, being assertive without being aggressive.

What is psychotherapy?

Psychotherapy tends to look at more deep seated issues. Where counselling tends to focus on a specific current problem, psychotherapy aims to look behind the presenting problem and see its meaning in the context of the whole of the person's experience and life. We would be encouraged to look more closely at our past, at our childhood and our relationship with our parents, at patterns, habits, processes that are lodged in the part of ourselves which is unconscious and of which we may be only dimly aware. This can be a protracted process involving sessions over many weeks, months, or even years, but not necessarily; it depends on the client and the psychotherapist.

Psychotherapy may bring out quite profound changes – in how we see ourselves, or how we treat our children, for example. But it also focuses on drawing out our potential; uncovering buried creative sides to ourselves – so the process can expand our capacity to fully experience the joys of life as well as dealing with the pain. Many people who seek psychotherapy are not going through a crisis in life but are looking for a way to get to know themselves better. They wish to understand their relationships more fully or to simply get more out of life. For lots of people this can be a rewarding and exciting adventure.

Types of therapy

Counselling and psychotherapy are often used as general terms for psychological and talking therapies but are also each a particular type of therapy. There are different methods and approaches to therapy; however the relationship with the therapist is generally more important than the method used. The choice of therapy may be limited unless seeking a private therapist. Approaches include: psychodynamic therapy, cognitive



behavioural therapy (CBT), humanistic, mindfulness and transactional analysis; as well as integrative therapy that includes a combination of approaches. For more information about types of therapy, please talk to your GP or see www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/what-is-therapy/types-of-therapy

Although most of these therapies tend to take place in a 1:1 setting, sometimes it can also be helpful to work with others. Group therapy helps people find solutions to problems by discussing them in a group setting with others who have experienced similar issues. Couples therapy, where both partners talk to the same counsellor, can help when a relationship is in crisis. In family therapy, the therapist meets the whole family and treats the family system as a whole, rather than individual members of the family. Counselling can also take place by telephone, email or online.

How long does counselling and psychotherapy take?

Sessions usually last 50-60 minutes, once a week for a period of weeks, or months, depending on the need and how the counselling works. How long it takes depends on you, the counsellor/psychotherapist and the problem. While deep rooted problems will take longer, perhaps months, even years, short term counselling for specific problem may take only a few weekly sessions.

Some people begin this way and then decide to make deep changes to their life and enter therapy for a longer open ended period. Mostly you might expect to go for one session a week, but the question of how many sessions should be discussed with the therapist.

How much will therapy cost?

Psychological therapies, including counselling and psychotherapy, are available for certain conditions free of charge on the NHS. If available, your GP or other healthcare professional can refer you to a qualified therapist, although waiting lists are often long and the range and scope of the services can be limited. Ask your GP for further details.

Some charities/voluntary organisations offer counselling, usually around a specific topic, such as bereavement, relationship problems or abuse. This is often provided free of charge or requiring a donation. In addition to providing telephone and email counselling, the Nacoa helpline will happily research face-to-face counselling services in your area.

It may be possible to access services through your workplace, as some employers offer an Employee Assistance Programme, which provides employees with free psychotherapy or counselling. University and colleges also usually provide free counselling services.

- Do I feel comfortable telling this person intimate details of my life?
- Do I feel safe with them?
- Do I like their manner towards me and their attitude to my questions?
- Do I trust them and feel able to be completely open with them?

Word of mouth from someone you respect can be a good way to find a counsellor, however bear in mind that what felt like the right person for someone else, may not feel right for you, since individuals vary in terms of their therapeutic needs and preferences.



At the moment there are no laws about who can use the terms counsellor, psychotherapist or therapist, so it is important to check they are registered with a professional body such as those listed below. These bodies require therapists to meet certain standards before they approve them, such as a minimum level of training, and will require them to agree to certain conditions of membership, such as following ethical guidelines, as well as providing you with a way of complaining if things go wrong.

- British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP) www.bacp.co.uk Tel: 01455 883300
- UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) www.ukcp.org.uk Tel: 020 7014 9955
- British Psychological Society (BPS) www.bps.org.uk Tel: 0116 254 9568

Choosing a therapist is similar to choosing any other professional to whom you will pay a fee. Some questions it may be helpful to ask, either on the telephone or at the initial session include:

- What will the costs, length and frequency of sessions be?
- What qualifications and training does the therapist have? Are they currently on the register of a professional association of psychotherapists or counsellors? If in doubt contact the association to check.
- How does the therapy work, what will the session involve?
- What sort of supervision does the therapist have?
- How much of their own therapy have they done?

It can be of benefit for you to shop around. Perhaps you could see two or three therapists for a first interview before deciding and do not be afraid to ask questions.

Most therapists will deal with a wide range of problems. Some specialise in specific areas (e.g. sexual, addictions, marriage) so you may wish to see someone with a particular focus. You could ask them if they have an understanding of addiction and the effect it can have on the family.

If you are suffering from an alcohol or drug addiction yourself, you may find it helpful to choose a therapist who adopts a more abstinence-based recovery approach. If you are using a Twelve Step Programme to overcome addiction or codependency, make sure your therapist is aware of this and supports you in your efforts.

There can be an advantage in having a same sex therapist if areas of childhood sexual abuse will be addressed.

For further information visit www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk – a website designed by BACP to help people find out more about counselling and psychotherapy. You can also talk through any concerns you have with Nacoa. Our helpline offers ongoing counselling by phone or email. We are unable to recommend individual counsellors but can help research organisations offering face-to-face counselling or support groups in your area.

