

# What To Expect From Counselling

*A Guide For First Time Clients*



**Clare Slaney**

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## **Introduction**

Sometimes their GP recommends it or their employer suggests it, perhaps a friend has had some and enjoyed it or a magazine article extols its virtue: whatever the reasons, a growing number of people are considering having counselling. I've lost count of how many people I've sat opposite who look uncomfortable and confused because they know they need to talk seriously about something that's causing them misery but they don't know where to begin. It's my job to make the environment safe and trustworthy and to help the person in front of me begin to talk about their life, but I've noticed that the same kind of questions about how the client and I might work together come up.

I've also noticed that clients are almost always very trusting: we tend to hand ourselves over totally to a person we consider an expert. And I've noticed that the term 'counsellor' is being used by people with no training or qualifications, and that, in a market flooded with counsellors, some therapists are presenting themselves in a manner that suggests they can 'cure' people of their unhappiness or unwanted behaviours. Many clients want and expect this but it's so much snake oil.

Counselling is hard work for both client and the counsellor. There are no magic words or techniques to deal with whatever's brought you to therapy, and it takes time to begin to gain understanding when things become more complex than how to get a new job or become more confident. You will find yourself thinking in new ways, and it may be that your world becomes disrupted for a period of time which is, after all, why you came to counselling. You want something to change. But the change has to come from you. The counsellor will accompany you, like an expert guide in new terrain, but it's your terrain.

Whether you pay for your counselling or not you are trusting yourself to a mysterious stranger. I think it's worth making some of that mystery less mystifying not least so that you can ask a prospective counsellor pertinent questions and begin the journey of self-knowledge knowing one or two landmarks.

### **A Note On My Approach To Models And Terminology**

I'm a Person Centred therapist and no expert on other established models of therapy. I don't claim to write about other models with anything but the very broadest of respectful brushstrokes that some practitioners will find unsatisfactory. Most clients are only interested in sitting with someone who will listen and relate to them rather than the theoretical background of their counsellor but I believe that it is useful for you to know what, in very simple terms, the four main therapeutic schools offer. This is to empower you to make a less than random choice on who you see and why, or at least to give you something to research on the net to see which kind of therapy you might best work with.

Whatever model you choose, however qualified your counsellor, you can feel secure in knowing that it is the empathic, respectful, bounded relationship between you that will do the work of therapy. Everything else is detail.

I have used the terms 'counsellor,' 'psychotherapist,' and 'therapist' interchangeably. There is some debate on how these terms are used but it is largely to do with status rather than any difference in what the therapist offers.

I have used the terms 'she' or 'he' when referring to clients or counsellors. Anything else became unwieldy.

## **Why therapy?**

From the beginning of human history people have needed to talk about their problems. Talking with our parents and grandparents, siblings and friends can often be enough but occasionally we'll still feel the need to talk, and more specifically be heard by someone who's a little distant from us and who we consider to be in a position to give us good advice.

These people have been shamans, priests, wise women, hermits or anyone who is seen to be astute and somewhat separate from the rest of the community, people who have a functional life on the edges of society and who do not seem to care so much about doing what everyone else is doing. Different cultures have perceived that persons role in different ways: sometimes they absolve a person of their guilt or give them tasks to perform, sometimes they create spells or consult the flight of birds or ask their spirit animal how best to move forward. Whatever happens, the enquirer visits the person they're drawn to talk with, spends time with them learning or doing something new and then they move back into their normal world with new insight and awareness.

Counselling is a branch of this long tradition and I would argue has much more in common with the ancient mysteries than it does with psychiatry. The ultimate statement for psychiatry is "Be Normal." The ultimate statement for counselling is "Know Thyself."

Life was less complex when society had definite expectations of what people should do. Everyone got married. Men were the head of the household, were employed and brought money home; women had children, kept house and were not employed; children were seen and not heard and were devoted to their parents; the elderly were pious and grateful for baskets of groceries and we all believed in a Christian God. If your dad was a miner and you were a boy you'd be a miner. If you were a girl you'd be a miners wife. If your dad was a shopkeeper, a landowner or a grocer and you were a boy, you'd be a shopkeeper, a landowner or a grocer. If you were a girl you'd become the wife of someone from your fathers' background or, if you were lucky, marry a man from a higher class than your own.

In general, people may not have been happier than we are now but they were more certain about where they were going and what they were supposed to do to get there. Choice, including the choices that other people are free to make, has brought us many more questions about our own life as well as a multitude of very challenging situations. Where in the country should you live? With whom? Should you go to university or straight to work and what do you do when unemployment looks likely? Should you settle down? When's the right time to have kids? How can you balance sleep, work, family, caring for your elderly parent and time for yourself? You feel unhappy because you are unemployed. You want to spend time with your children but you have to work. You had kids too young. You have waited too long to have kids. You are getting divorced. Your husband is having an affair. You are having an affair. You think you will never find someone to love who will love you. Looking back on your life you wonder why on earth you wasted all that time and you still do not know what you want to do.

Billions of pounds are spent looking for answers, from the esoteric search for 'healing' to a boot camp approach to attacking life. If we just give up moping/milk/ TV/ smoking and do more exercise/ meditation/ hard work/ positive thinking then our lives will magically transform. Sometimes, some of this will be true. Sometimes it will be a waste of your time and money and you will feel like a failure.

### **There is no answer to life.**

Most people come to counselling when they are at the end of their tether. They have spoken with their friends, read self-help books, asked their mum what she thinks, changed their diet, taken up running, got a new job, have a full social diary and still do not feel right. Sometimes people start getting panic attacks or find it impossible to sleep or become obsessive about work. Something is very wrong but they do not know what it is and whilst they might be getting tired of this state of affairs they notice that other people are also getting tired of it. Employers are looking at how much time they are taking off. Mum sighs when they talk about their problems. Friends who have sympathised, shared their experiences of the same situation and given advice do not seem to care as much as they did.

The brief introduction to their work that most counsellors write for their web profile will discuss time, empathy and relationship because the research demonstrates that this is what works. We live in a world where there seems to be an instant answer for everything. Feel unhappy? Have a haircut, go out with friends, have a massage. Feel confused about what you want to do with your life? Take an evening class, speak with friends who are living the life you want, do voluntary work. For this straightforward approach you may find coaching very

useful. Coaching is goal-orientated, instructive and about training you. This can be very useful indeed and many counsellors also offer coaching separate to counselling. But coaching is not counselling.

We need a certain kind of relationship, one that gives us room and freedom to explore and take risks, a relationship that accepts all our ways of being, including being sad and defeatist, furious, childlike and childish, one that doesn't ask us to prove anything and respects how and who we are. A relationship that knows we will make mistakes and still prizes us, with a person who can walk some way in our shoes, having not just understanding but empathy for our experience. We do not need martyrs or stand-in mothers or well-meaning carers to give us this relationship, we need someone who has taken this journey of self-examination themselves and who can walk beside us as we take it for ourselves.

## **Counsellors do not give advice**

Advice is based on what other people have found useful so of course you should lose or gain weight if your weight is causing you problems. Of course you should leave that man if he is taking money from you. It is obvious you need time to relax if you are overworked, should study harder if you have fallen behind in your studies, should do this that and the other. So why doesn't everyone just do the obvious, take the advice and make life better? Increasingly, we are told that we fail to take advice and do what we should do because we are lazy and stupid, that if we just worked harder we would become the successful, prosperous person that is possible for all of us. I wonder why, then, so many therapists see clients who are rich, successful, well liked by their peers and colleagues and loved by their partner and children?

Therapy has many of its foundations in philosophy. You will be asking yourself questions about what you want from life, about what a good life might be and how to go about getting it. You will be given the space in which to examine your own beliefs about the way you are now, the way you perceive the world and your place in it. These concepts may have been very important to you but now they may need alteration or even to be put aside. You will be faced with yourself. You can only do that if you are not given advice about how you should look.

Coming to counselling means that you are ready to explore, in depth, parts of your life that you feel unhappy about. You will spend some time exploring your pain and naturally that is upsetting. Counselling does not entail, as some critics suggest, wallowing endlessly in misery but it is a journey into and through upset and sometimes trauma. This is where friends and family become less useful because they will feel distressed themselves as they become involved in your distress. Understandably, they will want to limit your distress. Counsellors will let you be the judge of your own limits. It is up to you how much you want to explore.

Counselling is about taking back control of your own life, in your own way. You can talk about whatever you want for as many sessions as you like. The counsellor will not tell you when you have said enough, it is up to you to decide what you want to talk about and for how long. You are in control of what you want to talk about. If you want to spend a long time exploring your past, difficulties with the present, where you want to go on holiday or the weather then that is what the session will be about. The counsellor will not tell you what to say, has no investment in changing the way in which you think about the past, present or future. Instead, the process of being listened and responded to very carefully will help you discern for yourself what is important for you.

You are the expert in your own life, and whilst this sounds comforting many of us actually want an expert to tell us how to live better. No counsellor worth their qualification will offer that. Your family and friends may believe that if you got a higher paying job or took a sabbatical, give up your lover or get married then your life will improve. But if you do not believe it then it will not work for you.

Reclaiming that personal authority for yourself is a surprisingly complex process. You have to overcome decades of being told how to think, behave, and live up to other people's expectations, whether that's family, the media, or your peer group. Being told how to think and live sounds oppressive but most of us are very comfortable with it, until we find that someone else's idea of a good life does not fit us. The counselling relationship - where the counsellor truly trusts you to find your own way through your own life - is unlike any other you will have experienced and takes time to get used to. Once you begin to deeply trust your own wisdom you have more solid ground from which to make decisions to help you live in a way that truly suits you. Sounds straightforward - and it is - but that sincere trust in oneself takes time to build and can only be facilitated by unconditional trust from your counsellor rather than well meaning advice.



## **Why people do not come to counselling**

People who come to counselling for the first time are often quite reluctant to. Here are some reasons why:

### **Only weak people come to counselling**

Certainly when we are feeling strong and good about life we will not feel the need to come to therapy. That said, any number of intelligent, happy people come to therapy because they want to know more about themselves and their place in the world. It takes strength and wisdom to know when you need real support rather than distraction.

### **Only mad people come to counselling**

Define mad. Many of the things we do and the ways in which we live look insane to people who do not share our culture. A great many people pack themselves into trains like cattle twice a day or drink alcohol until they vomit for fun. Within living memory being gay or a single mother was a reason to be committed to an asylum.

Going to a therapist is like going to a doctor: you do not wait until you are dying to ask for help because, being a mature and sensible person, you know that asking for help might be an indication that you are sane.

### **If I talk about my problems they will get worse**

Sometimes this is true.

If you feel that you are a stuck record then that is something to think about. A good therapist will carefully draw this to your attention and help you explore why you just cannot stop talking about your problem. It is important to understand that counselling is not just talking it is a process of building relationship, of being heard and listened to very carefully, of you becoming aware of yourself just as you are and gaining understanding. This can be a tough exercise. At the same time it can be rewarding and even enjoyable.

### **I'll be betraying my family**

You do not have to belong to any particular religion to be told that what happens at home is not anyone else's business. At one end of the spectrum many families are private, self contained, not introspective, just get on with things and do fine. From time to time one or other member of that family will need to talk about something that they believe their family won't understand and may feel disloyal if they seek support elsewhere. They may speak to one very trusted friend, a spiritual leader or just swallow their feelings and carry on and be OK with that. At the other end of the spectrum not telling people what is going on is part of

abuse, where family members do not speak about what is happening because they have been very seriously warned not to.

Counselling is confidential within certain legal boundaries , which means that if your counsellor speaks about your situation outside of the therapy room you can make an official complaint against her that will affect her livelihood. Some people tell counsellors about abuse so that the counsellor will take the responsibility of contacting other professionals for them.

### **Talking about it will make it real**

There are times when you could punch your boss. You have been right on the verge of belting your 5 year old. You have imagined yourself stabbing your partner. You love your mother but part of you wishes she would hurry up and die. If you say it you fear it will come true. As you know, suppressing feelings takes up a huge amount of energy. Conversely, speaking about your suppressed feelings, even while you may be weeping or feeling like you could throw up, can relieve a lot of tension. When that tension is reduced you will have more energy to gain better understandings of your situation and explore wider, more constructive options.

### **What's the point of talking about it?**

You can explore different ways of doing things, with someone who won't judge you and who doesn't have an opinion on what you want or what you are doing. Parts of counselling should be hard work and that work is you gaining new awareness, understanding, motivation, strength.

### **I might have to admit I'm wrong**

You might. But unless you are harming someone else or yourself a good counsellor has little interest in concepts of right and wrong, must or should and will give you space, time and trust you to know what is right and wrong for yourself.

### **The therapist will tell me I'm bad**

And then you can make a formal complaint against him or her.

### **I will lose social status**

Drug addicts, alcoholics, people who can't hold down a job and are on benefits go to therapy, and they are BAD. No, they are just addicts and people without a job who need money from the State to pay the bills. JK Rowling, Stephen Fry and Mike Brearley have been in therapy alongside any number of high earning, high

status bankers and investors, ordinary fathers, grandmothers, librarians, entrepreneurs, engineers and dog owners.

## **Black people/ Chinese people/ people who are not White do not go to therapy**

This is more or less a fact and it is a difficult one. There are a multitude of reasons for this, from language issues, religious and cultural identity to racism, and it is true that there are nowhere near enough non-White therapists. That said, an increasing number of people from many cultures other than Caucasian are taking a positive interest in therapy. A White therapist will acknowledge that she cannot know the non-White experience and she will reiterate how important it is for you to be in charge of your own process on your own terms.

## **I can't afford therapy**

For many people this is also a fact and it is another hard one. Therapists are mainly self-employed and have to cover their room hire, accountancy, insurance, professional membership and education costs as well as their own wage but this does limit non-medical care to people who can afford it. And since many of the problems that people come to therapy with are caused, one way or another, by issues to do with money this is problematic.

That said, many people will spend £100 a week in pubs, restaurants, cafés and cinemas but resent spending £50 a week on therapy. Many people will spend incredible amounts of money on clothes they will never wear and endless salon treatments but will not invest in therapy. Some people spend money on an hours lie down in a darkened room with some quiet music while someone does something esoteric at them. All of these things have their value but regularly spending money on stuff that makes no lasting positive alteration to your life is an indication that something is out of balance. Whilst everyone gets an immediate kick from the distraction that food, alcohol, fun or an hour with a wind chime can offer, therapy is a serious investment in yourself.

## Which kind of therapy to choose?

There are various models of therapy to choose from and it is worth knowing what their understanding of human feelings and behaviour are based on so that you have some concept of what your therapist may be thinking about as he listens to you. That said, every piece of modern research suggests that, more than the theoretic foundation **it is the way the client feels about the relationship between them and counsellor** that is the best predictor of how therapy will be perceived by the client.

It is important to be that specific about the wording: clients and counsellors may well have different impressions about how well therapy is going. The client may feel miserable, downhearted, upset and bewildered and the therapist may be content, even pleased with the way therapy is proceeding *at the same time* as feeling warmth, respect, empathy and concern for the client. Conversely, the client may feel that they are achieving a great deal in coming to therapy and the counsellor is not sure why they are there. A client may positively dislike their therapist, think they're a charlatan and a fool. Sometimes that may indeed be true but since you are paying good money for a service (and even if you are getting free therapy via an agency) it is well worth being honest about your feelings particularly the feelings you have about your therapist. If she can work with you to explore these feelings without patronising or blaming you then you are likely to be onto something good.

## Psychoanalytic

The original Freudian therapy, which perceives all adult problems to have their roots in childhood experience. The personality is divided into the ID (the impulsive, carefree, careless part) the SUPEREGO (the conscience or restraining part) and the EGO (which tries to mediate between the two.) Human behaviour is determined by DRIVES or motivations which are largely unconscious, that is, outside of the persons awareness. DEFENSE MECHANISMS are responses to reality that help protect our idea of who we are.

The psychoanalytic model believes that as a child the client will not have moved entirely through various stages of development and the analyst will make INTERPRETATIONS, proposals about what the clients behaviours, thoughts or words may really mean. The analyst does not interact much with the client to the point where they may sit in the same room but out of view. Analysis can take many years and the client can be expected to attend three or four times a week.

Analysis works with concepts of TRANSFERENCE and COUNTERTRANSFERENCE. TRANSFERENCE is the inappropriate repetition in the present of a relationship from the past. COUNTERTRANSFERENCE is the therapists' feelings about the client which may be some indication of the clients process. It can also be the therapists' own unconscious at work. INTERPRETATIONS of what the client is saying and doing are made, offering indications about where and how the client may be, and with particular reference to how they perceive the therapist.

## **Psychodynamic**

This is a more modern version of analysis which relies much less on the client's total immersion into therapy. Like analysis, psychodynamic theory works with concepts of TRANSFERENCE and COUNTERTRANSFERENCE but the relationship between counsellor and client is of greater importance than in analysis. The psychodynamic counsellor may well be very focused on the relationship between themselves and the client. Typically a client will visit once a week for 50 minutes for 6 weeks or more.

## **Humanistic Therapies**

Person Centred, Gestalt, Transactional Analysis and Existential Therapy amongst others fall into this category and in general terms they aim to see the client as a whole person without the need to interpret words or behaviour. In offering a particular kind of relationship – non-judgemental, EMPATHIC and CONGRUENT– the therapist believes that the client will move towards greater understanding of who they are, what they truly value and what they really want from life. The focus can be on what is happening right now, on the essential freedom of the client, and on trusting clients to do whatever they need to do to move towards authenticity. Sessions typically occur weekly for 50 minutes and last for 6 weeks or more.

## **Behavioural Models**

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and other behavioural models generally believe that a particular way of thinking leads to certain behaviours and being aware of those thoughts can help the client become more alert to the cascade of behaviours that result from them. Panic attacks, phobias, substance misuse, depression, eating disorders – whatever the problem CBT will approach it in a goal-orientated and systematic manner. CBT is the primary therapy on offer in the NHS because it can be tested in the same way as a drug or surgery and because it is cheap.

CBT began as a way of clarifying ways of thinking for a client and proposing new thought processes, a methodical approach that took as long as it took. Then the number of sessions was reduced until now it is usually 6 and in some cases even done via computer with no therapist input at all. CBT can be a wonderful relief for many people offering a straightforward approach to dealing with the misery and fear of disabling psychological responses. If you have ever had a panic attack you will know that it feels as if you are dying and if anything can help you stop having them you will grab it with both hands. Depression can ruin a life, making it small, isolated and pointless and if CBT can address that – and it sometimes can - then nothing should stand in the way. Where many therapists are dubious

about CBT is when it is used as a way to treat people as machines on the cheap in order to make them normal.

CBT can help a person become more aware of the thoughts that make them depressed and other models of therapy can help a person make sense of their experiences both from the past and in the here and now. Panic attacks and phobias are particularly well treated by CBT and I have met a number of clients who have been cured of their fear of one thing only to develop a fear of something else, and whose panic attacks coincide too neatly with something they say they love or something they want to avoid.

### **What is the difference between counselling and psychotherapy?**

Essentially, none. It used to be that if you had 6 sessions it was counselling and more than 6 sessions was psychotherapy, but in fact the training and experience of both counsellors and psychotherapists does not have a nationally set curriculum and is very largely the same.

## **Therapy options**

Realistically, if you go to your GP you are likely to be given two choices: CBT or 6 sessions with a counsellor attached to the GP. These counsellors, whatever model they work within, are always well qualified and experienced and are very likely to offer you a high quality experience. They are also free.

The NHS also offers more intense and long-term psychological therapies in a setting linked to mental health teams. These are almost always psychodynamic and very often staffed by student clinical psychotherapists who are learning their trade. They are also trained, qualified and experienced doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, mental health nurses or other health professional who has a particular interest in taking further specialist training, so you are not going to meet an 18 year old. This will also be free.

Counselling and psychotherapy training involves getting a certain number of hours of face to face work with clients and to facilitate this various agencies are set up where people can access free or low cost therapy. You should not be asked to pay more than 12% of your income and the agency should be open to negotiation about reducing this. Some of these agencies are excellent and some less so. Some are specifically aimed at a particular client group - women who have experienced domestic violence, drug or alcohol users, sexual abuse or rape, victims of serious crime, bereavement – and if you fall into one of these groups you could do a lot worse than to use these services even though you are likely to meet with a student. A student supported and supervised by a specialist agency can be more likely to be useful to you than a qualified, private counsellor who does not have a solid grounding in the specialty.

## **Private therapists**

I know a woman who trained as a counsellor some years ago in a small college in a small, provincial town. As a gift to mark her qualification her husband bought her a years rental of a Harley Street office. There are very well qualified, thoughtful practitioners who, as well as having a private practice, work voluntarily for a charity where the assumption is that clients will only meet with student counsellors. It is incredibly important not to judge a counsellor by the status of their office address or the glitziness of their professional profile.

The majority of counsellors will now be registered with the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) or the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP.) The UKCP have two levels of attainment for therapists who meet clients: Trainee Therapist and Full Clinical Individual Member. The BACP have three levels of qualification that demonstrate a practitioner's ability to satisfy certain criteria such as professional development, personal development, regular supervision and regular practice. The designations are Member BACP, BACP Accredited and BACP Senior Accredited which indicate how long a person has been practicing. These distinctions are useful guidance but nothing more.

Lesley Pilkington was a BACP Senior Accredited counsellor with a successful private practice that she had run for many years. It took an undercover reporter to expose her practice of 'reparative therapy,' that is, insisting that gay people had become gay in response to being abused as a child and 'helping them' to become heterosexual. Qualified, experienced therapists have so abused clients minds that the law has been changed to refuse counselling to some child victims and most rape victims until after their legal case is over. This is yet another reason why it is vital that counsellors do not tell clients what to do or what to think.

## **Choosing a therapist**

People tend not to talk about having had therapy because they fear the reaction they may get from friends and family, but if you mention that you are considering it you may be surprised at the response. Perhaps you will have a totally ordinary conversation where people discuss the pros and cons of having therapy just as they would about where to go on holiday. Perhaps a friend will approach you in private, tell you about their experience and recommend their therapist. This is as good a start as any in choosing your own therapist.

You will discover a lot about a counsellor from their online presence. Most have webpages and the BACP and UKCP have online directories where you can discover if your counsellor is a member of either organisation, as well as reading through the ethical guidelines we work with. Read counsellor's blogs and Facebook pages where you can discover a great deal more about us.

The single most important guide to whether you should work with a particular counsellor or not is if you feel comfortable with them. You should feel at ease with them and treated as an equal. This is not to say that counselling should always be soothing and gentle. Some important work occurs when you are able to speak about your irritation or fear or loathing or desire for your counsellor which is when it is hugely important to also feel safe to do so knowing that they are not going to be angry, vengeful or abuse your trust by allowing a non-therapeutic relationship to occur. No counsellor worth their qualification will respond to a clients declaration of love or hate with face value acceptance.

8 times out of 10 you will feel content with the first counsellor you meet and they will be at least competent in offering you a good service. Of the two in 10 times you might feel that you do not like the counsellor consider that one of those times might be because the counsellor may be offering to work very hard with you and you may not be ready to work that hard.

From time to time we all need to go to confession or whisper a secret or sit with someone who will allow us to break apart, and that can be an important part of therapy. We all need reassurance from time to time and that can be part of therapy too. That may be all you need and it is absolutely fine to bring to therapy. Some counsellors are very good at making their clients feel better all the time if that is what the client will pay for - we all would like to feel better when we are



feeling miserable, anxious or fearful. And some counsellors will give you the space to feel whatever you are feeling, including giving you the freedom to feel absolutely wretched at the end of a session.

Most therapists come into training with the vague idea that we want to help people, because Being Helpful gets rewarded particularly if you are a woman. Almost all of us will have been in therapy ourselves and been so interested in it that we want to look at it from the other side. But a good therapist does not remain a therapist because she wants to help people. A good therapist is fascinated by the human condition and wants to gain understanding and wisdom about it, about the ways in which we can live better and ultimately how she herself can understand her own ways of being and become as whole as possible. Beware the counsellor who brings you tea and pats your hand or makes you feel soft and lovely. Beware the charismatic expert. And if you leave an initial session feeling a bit unsettled at the same time as secretly agreeing with something the counsellor has said that may well be the counsellor for you.

### **Free initial sessions**

Some counsellors offer a free first session so that you and they can see how you get on. Frankly, this is offered for one reason only: to attract clients. Some areas of the country are saturated with counsellors and market forces will dictate that we will all be vying to make ourselves more attractive than each other so those counsellors who can afford to give free sessions will do exactly that. For some counsellors there is a debate about whether or not a free session is ethical or whether it offers complete freedom to the client. Dentists and accountants do not give free appointments. The therapeutic counselling relationship begins as soon as you speak with the counsellor on the phone or via email and a majority of counsellors respect that.

## **The contract**

When you and your counsellor agree to work together the counsellor will give you a copy of the contract that you will work within. It will look something like this:

### **Code of Ethics and Practice**

The counsellor is a member of the British Association of and Psychotherapy and endeavours to work by its Code of Ethics, a copy of which is available on request or at [www.bacp.co.uk/ethical\\_framework](http://www.bacp.co.uk/ethical_framework).

### **Confidentiality**

Details of sessions are confidential. The Counsellor reviews her work in professional consultation but the client's name and other identifying details will not be used in these sessions. This confidentiality does not cover the following:

- i serious injury or harm will be caused to myself or another individual.
- ii child abuse has been disclosed.
- iii a miscarriage of justice will occur.
- iv The Counsellor is summonsed by a Court of Law.

### **Length of Sessions**

Psychotherapy is offered for 50 minutes on a weekly basis.

### **Abusive or Threatening Behaviour**

Abusive or threatening behaviour by either the Client or Counsellor is not acceptable. The Counsellor reserves the right to withdraw services if the client become abusive or threatening.

### **Financial Agreement**

The cost of sessions will be between £50 and £80.

I will pay for missed sessions.

Signed:

Client

Signed:

Therapist

# What does all this mean?

## 1. Code of Ethics and Practice.

This is the guidance that counsellors aim to work within. If you feel that the counsellor has done something during your time together that you are uncomfortable with it is really important to speak with her first and foremost, being honest and straightforward. Listen to what she has to say about it. See how you feel. If you remain uncomfortable with something that happened in a session you can refer to the ethical guidelines and see if they cover it, and then make a decision about whether you want to take it further.

If a counsellor wants to date you or see you outside of the therapeutic hour or asks you to do anything physical you feel uncomfortable with or asks to use your contacts or money to help them then you have the option of telling them that this is not in the contract and you want to terminate the contract. You also have the option of saying nothing and just leaving at the end of the session with no intention of returning. And you have the option of contacting their professional body to make a complaint. Complaints made to the BACP that are upheld are recorded at the back of the members magazine and are almost all about the client feeling unheard or being treated inconsistently rather than the counsellor being directly abusive.

## 2. Confidentiality

The client is free to tell anyone anything about what is going on in their therapy. The counsellor is expected to remain almost totally silent about the details of their work, forever. When counsellors write about our work we have to disguise clients so that they won't be identified and so that the client won't be able to recognize themselves. Confidentiality is the bedrock of counselling allowing a trusting relationship between you and your therapist to grow.

### Exceptions

Where that alters is when you disclose that someone else is going to be harmed or you are seriously harming yourself. If a client tells a counsellor that a child, an elderly person or any other vulnerable person is being abused, or someone else is planning something that will harm others (within certain grey definitions) or if you know of a miscarriage of justice (the conviction and punishment of a person for a crime they did not commit) then the counsellor has a duty to let appropriate people know.

Disclosure of something that has been noted as an issue where confidentiality is no longer guaranteed can be an important milestone in therapy. Some people tell their counsellor so that the counsellor will take the responsibility from them and make sure something is done but this only occurs right at the end of what can be a rigorous process. That process will begin with the counsellor supporting you to make the disclosure yourself to someone with a different level of authority. If

you know that a child is being harmed or a helpless person left alone without food or warmth what is stopping you from telling someone else? What might you need in order for you to make the disclosure?

In the case of becoming involved in a group that is considered to be criminal it is almost always better for the person who is dubious about joining that group to go to the police themselves rather than wait for the police to come to them.

### **Suicide**

A great many people think about killing themselves some of the time. Quite a number of people think about killing themselves a few times a week and some of those people will go on to take their own lives. Just as we make choices about our lives sometimes some people make choices about their deaths. A good counsellor will be sanguine if you say you are feeling suicidal. There is such a taboo about 'committing' suicide that being able to speak about it with someone who is able to listen and who can accompany you on part of that journey of helplessness, hopelessness and despair can be enough to stop someone killing themselves. Many suicidal people feel unseen and unheard so to be seen and to be heard can make the difference between life and death. Your counsellor is not responsible for persuading you to stay alive but if you say something that makes her believe that you are going to kill yourself before the next session then she has a duty to let your GP or another person in authority know. Ideally, she will support you to approach your GP yourself.

### **Self harm**

People take a lot of trouble to hide self-harm so to disclose this is a big step and the counsellor will not be in a hurry to call in the cavalry. She will want your GP to be involved though, and that is dependent on you giving her your GP's details. It is unusual for self-harm to reach a point where a person's life is at immediate risk without other people noticing but if your counsellor thinks you have reached that point she will speak with you about calling your GP there and then, and ultimately will call an ambulance if she believes your life to be in immediate danger.

### **Harm to Others**

'Harm to others' is very often a grey area. Transporting illegal drugs is something a counsellor has to break confidence over but taking illegal drugs is not. Planning a terrorist act has to be reported but when does that become real? When the client says they are reading Jihadist websites or when they are thinking about raising money for the guerilla fighters in another country? If the country was Pakistan or Brussels would that make a difference? What about if the client says they are anxious about the noise of their neighbours fighting when they hear a woman or children screaming?

The guidelines around disclosure are wider than most people imagine and come down to 'Would the consequences of disclosure harm the client? And would the

harm outweigh the good?' After this kind of conversation between the client and counsellor the counsellor will speak with her Supervisor, a fellow counsellor usually with more experience who is able to support the counsellor to explore their relationships with clients and will support her in making decisions about breaking confidentiality. After that conversation the counsellor can phone the BACP or UKCP ethics department and ask their opinion. These conversations are likely to take place very soon after the client has left but only right at the very end of this process, when the client is utterly unable to speak with a person who will do something about the situation, will the counsellor involve the police, social services or other appropriate agency.

## **Supervision**

Every counsellor needs to explore their feelings and thoughts about their relationship with clients so that this relationship remains therapeutic. A supervisor is an experienced counsellor, usually from the same theoretic background as the counsellor, who will listen and make suggestions about the counsellor's relationship with the client. SUPERVISION should not be about dissecting the client but focusing on the counsellor, on their way of being with each client. Supervision is a formal requirement for professional bodies and occurs regularly – about every fortnight to every month depending on how experienced the therapist is – and costs the counsellor around the same as therapy.

## **Working with a counselling agency**

If you are being seen in a counselling agency the contract will say something about information being confidential within the agency. It is a convention that clients names are not mentioned during supervision.

Agencies that perform initial sessions to determine whether a person is suitable for counselling will share information gained during session with the person who makes the allocation and with the counsellor the client is allocated to. If another agency, e.g. social services, housing or police is involved in the clients life then the agency will not share any information with them, including whether or not you are actually attending counselling.

### **Court Summonses.**

It is incredibly unusual for a Court to summons a counsellor but it does happen and this is why many counsellors do not keep notes, so that there is nothing for the Court to subpoena. If you are seeing a counsellor in an agency they are likely to keep notes and be trained in how to keep them so that if the notes are subpoenaed they do not implicate the client, the counsellor or anyone else.

If a counsellor working with an agency is subpoenaed it is unlikely that she will attend court; rather the agency will provide a report on her behalf. If she is working privately and is made to go to court then she will answer the prosecution and the defense truthfully. It is important to know that even in the counselling room, the counsellor does not take sides.

### **3. Length of Sessions**

Why meet once a week for 50 minutes?

Part of this is convention. 50 minutes allows the counsellor 10 minutes between clients to write up notes, clear her mind of the most recent client and prepare to meet the next. One session a week gives the client the opportunity to process – to think about the experience over a period of time. Counselling has an aim of being with a person so that the person can better understand themselves and their circumstances: if a client needs a counsellor for that to happen *all the time* then something is not right. Limiting the time that a client spends in therapy also establishes useful boundaries not least so that the client can experience how they react to boundaries, and lets a person know that they can survive and thrive without constant support.

That said, there is no reason why you should not see a counsellor as often as you and she agree to see each other. I have seen clients twice a week during times that were particularly stressful for them and would consider seeing them every day for a limited period if the client asked for this during a time that was exceptionally difficult – the death of a child or other loved person or coming to terms with a shocking diagnosis.

The point is that this is negotiable. It can be difficult for a counsellor to ask a client if they would like to meet more often because this may be misconstrued. A great many clients hear a suggestion or a proposal that perhaps they may want something as the counsellor telling them they should do something. If you ask the worst answer you will get is No.

### **4. Abusive or threatening behaviour**

People come to counselling for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes people come because they are feeling aggrieved and want someone to back them up, which we all need from time to time. But counsellors specifically do not have opinions on whether you are right or wrong in a situation and they do not take sides. This can be frustrating for some people. Issues that keep repeating themselves in the clients life are likely to occur in the counselling relationship too, one difference being that if you become aggressive with a counsellor she will leave the room, call the police and not see you again.

Clients are more than welcome to explore their own rage, fury, blistering anger and then to look at what might be beyond that. Quite often it is depression,

sorrow, survival. When it is entitlement, control and abuse of power and these things manifest in counselling and continue without comprehension the relationship is over.

## **5. Financial agreement**

The fee you pay for gym membership or a night class or for a piano or maths tutor indicates that you value their skills and expertise and it is the same for counsellors. It can feel strange to pay someone to care for you but actually, though this can be difficult to come to terms with, a counsellor is not in the same role as a family member or a lover or your best friend, she is simply there to offer you a particular environment and relationship in which you are free to be as you are, without judgment.

A good counsellor cares deeply for all her clients and also largely stops thinking about them when she is not with them or in supervision because to do otherwise becomes overwhelming after two or three clients, and is very counterproductive to the therapeutic relationship. Your doctor cares for you but does not call you at home to see how you are feeling unless she is really very anxious about your wellbeing. It takes years in formal education to learn how to trust the client to make good decisions, and counsellors continue with professional development throughout our careers so that we can improve the service we offer.

Some counsellors offer a sliding scale of fees and it is important to know that whether you pay £30 or £100 you will get the same service. A sliding scale usually starts at what it costs the counsellor to offer a session and the upper fee is to help guide the client about potentially useful boundaries. Some agencies that charge fees do so because they have recognised that when we pay for something we value it more. They ask people on benefits to pay around 10% of their gross annual income which for most people will mean around £8 per session. For someone on £20k that would be £20 a session and so on. I've yet to meet a person on £100,000 a year who would be content to pay 10% of their gross income but if you fall into this category your counsellor will be content to accept the same proportion of your income that they expect someone on benefits to pay. I have met some very affluent clients who pay the lowest fee possible and some clients who, despite being on benefits, attempt to pay more than they need to. Our attitudes to money are useful information about how we perceive value, worth, cost, people, ourselves, the world.

### **Paying for missed sessions**

Whether a client turns up for a session or not, that hour is theirs. The counsellor cannot suddenly fit another client in and the landlord they rent their office from does not care whether clients turn up or not, they just want the rent. Some counsellors will want 24 or 48 hours notice of cancellation before they will waive a fee, some accept no notice at all. If you have an emergency most counsellors will waive their fee or reduce it.

Missed sessions can indicate that the client is fearful of exploring something that they are coming close to, or feeling unengaged and bored. They may feel absolutely no chemistry between themselves and the counsellor or feel actively judged by them or may have strong feelings of loathing or love. They may feel exhausted. They may actually be exhausted. Very often when an employer or partner or well meaning friend sends a person to therapy that person will have zero motivation to engage, they're just pleasing someone else, or perhaps the motivation is to tick the 'therapy' box to prove that therapy has not helped.

I had a client who had a good marriage, loved his fulfilling work, had great friends and a wonderful social life and still had a yearning for something more, a hole that he could not fill which was making him sad and anxious. After a few sessions he realized he was really missing his kids; between his work and their routines they said hello to each other once a day if they were lucky. He called me within 48 hours of our appointment to say that an opportunity had arisen for him to spend a whole day with the kids but it was on the day that we were supposed to meet. My question was 'What feels like the most therapeutic choice to you?' and his answer was to be with his kids. He paid me, not just because that was part of the contract but because of the out-of-session phone call that helped clarify his choice and because he respected my flexibility not to demand his presence.

Imagine your therapist is your plumber: if you miss your appointment with your plumber you still pay for it. That's the situation for all self-employed professionals.



# Coming to therapy for the first time

## When to arrive

Arrive 5 minutes before your session begins. Many therapists work from rooms with a reception area and toilets but some do not and some work from home with no waiting area at all. It is not unusual to ring the bell and be asked to wait until closer to your appointment time. This is not personal but a way of maintaining all clients' confidentiality: you may not want to see or be seen by other clients. If you arrive late for any reason your appointment time will last from when it was supposed to start for 50 minutes.

Counselling is all about bringing clarity and understanding to your life because many of our actions and the reasons for those actions are not clear to us. Some clients are consistently late for sessions because they are always late for everything or because they are overworked or have said yes to things they do not actually want to do. Sometimes 50 minutes can feel like too much for this kind of relationship and introspection.

## The room

The counselling room is meant to be conducive to thoughtful conversation. Ideally, it will be very quiet, soothingly lit, without air fresheners or other smells and uncluttered. Two chairs will generally be opposite each other without a desk in between and you are free to sit where you want. There will be a clock where you can see it and sometimes two clocks so that both you and the counsellor are aware of the time. A box of tissues will be close by as a kind of hospitality knowing that many people do cry during therapy. You are not obliged to cry. Some counsellors will have a glass of water for you and for them and if they do not you can ask for water if you need it.

## The first 10 minutes

If you are distressed you are free to start talking immediately because the contract and health and safety information cannot be absorbed if your mind is elsewhere. If you are composed then the counsellor is likely to go through this information with you making sure that you are both clear about it. Most counsellors will offer the opportunity to take the contract home, read it over the following week and come back with any questions before signing it.

Ask questions about what model your counsellor works with, if she's expecting to take any holidays in the foreseeable future, if she belongs to a professional membership group, if she has supervision and any other questions that you might have. It might be useful to write these questions down so you can remember them.

Once the formalities are over, then what?

Counsellors want to work with whatever you want to work with. The aim is to hand power over to you and this is much more difficult than it sounds. Counsellors are experts and experts tell people who do not know what to do, what to do and how to do it, right? Not counsellors. Counsellors are experts at building a therapeutic relationship and a working alliance knowing that these two aspects of therapy are the ones that matter. The THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP is the safe, empathic, bounded connection between counsellor and client in which the client is most likely to find feelings, thoughts, insights and awareness that are ultimately beneficial to them. The WORKING ALLIANCE is the effective partnership between client and counsellor, the agreement that you are both working towards the same things.

### **Silences**

To create an environment in which the therapeutic relationship and the working alliance can flourish the counsellor will offer you a lot of space to speak, to think, to process. Silences are not a test but can feel like one: remember that your counsellor is in service to you and the 50 minutes is yours. Some counsellors might start a session by asking, 'How would you like to start?' or 'How might we use this session?' It is fine not to know and you are free to say that your mind has gone blank. To give you a hand the counsellor may ask about the first thing that comes into your mind.

There is a particular culture around counselling, one that takes one or two sessions to get used to, but once you become accustomed to it it will feel very natural. A little of this culture, like the 50 minute hour, is purely for the benefit of the counsellor. But the rest of it - the silences, the enquiry that seems to make you burst into tears, the statement that chills you to the bone, the requirement that, whatever state you are in with 5 minutes to go to the end of the session you leave at the end of the session - is all based on theories and practices that have been endlessly researched and debated.

So you are free to speak about whatever you want in your own time. You are in charge. You have the authority.

### **The end of the session**

50 minutes can go very quickly so it is no bad thing to keep an eye on the clock yourself as well as relying on the counsellor. Many counsellors will quietly draw your attention to the fact that there are five or 10 minutes left so that you can begin to prepare yourself for an ending.

A good number of clients will leave the thing they want to talk about to the very end. This can be because they fear being overwhelmed by the enormity of the subject and just want to tentatively say a few words about it to see what that feels like and then leave it alone for a week. Some clients begin talking about

something upsetting to see if the counsellor can handle an issue that the client experiences as disgusting, shocking, shameful or some other difficult feeling. Some clients do it to test the counsellor's boundaries: "Will the counsellor really make me leave if I'm weeping?"

The answer is yes.

The counsellor is aware of timing and the atmosphere in the room and is unlikely to encourage you to start talking about something devastating with 10 minutes to go. She may interrupt to warn you about the time and may even suggest that you wait until the next session. If you are determined to continue talking about a very upsetting subject then the counsellor will listen with care, advise you that the session is ended and attempt to help you to compose yourself using a number of standard techniques. If you are unable to regain some calm the counsellor is likely, in a very neutral tone, to tell you that the session is at an end and that they are going to leave the room, and then leave the room. The purpose of this is to remind you that you are in charge of your own life and have the capacity and ability to manage your feelings and behaviours. It is also a reminder that boundaries exist for a reason.

In the years that I have worked as a counsellor I have never had to walk out of the counselling room because a client has been so distraught that they could not control themselves. It has not happened to any of the very many counsellors I have worked or spoken with. Counselling does not make people suddenly and unexpectedly plunge into catastrophic disclosure so please do not imagine that you are going to collapse at the end of any session. In the century that counselling has been practiced millions of clients have been seen and practically everything that can happen has happened so we have techniques and practices to cope with events that are almost entirely theoretical.

## **Leaving the room**

Give yourself time to move from the counselling room to everyday life. Factor in a stroll in the park, lunch or dinner, something in a café (eating and non-alcoholic drinks help ground you) doing something simple for half an hour before you rush on to the next thing. Some people slot therapy into their lunch hour but this is far from ideal; therapy is not a box ticking exercise, it is an intense engagement that can shake you up. Taking care of your health by leaving work for a period of time to eat is not just a basic employment right, it demonstrates self respect.

## **The Counselling Process**

Getting used to this new way of being with another person will take a little time but if you are ready for counselling the PROCESS will begin to flow pretty easily. Here is one theoretical construct to give you some idea of how it might go:

1. The client is very defensive and resistant to the idea that they might change.
2. The client becomes less rigid and will talk about other people and outside events.
3. The client will talk about themselves but not about how they're feeling or what's happening in the present.
4. The client will talk about their feelings and begin to allow a relationship with the counsellor to develop.
5. The client can talk about what they're feeling in the room with the counsellor in the present, begins to rely more on their own ability to make decisions and begins to take responsibility for their own behaviour.
6. The client rapidly develops a sense of authenticity and judges people less, bringing new awareness about themselves and their place in the world into their everyday life.
7. The client becomes empathic and non-judgmental.

People who choose to come to therapy generally begin around stage 3 or 4 and usually end around stage 6. It takes emersion in a supportive, disciplined environment and dedication to become the saintly stage 7 person, and stage 7 is a shift in attitude rather than an absolute change for all circumstances. People who have been told to come to counselling often begin around stage 1 and who can blame them?

## **Developing the counselling relationship**

### **Beginnings**

The start of the counselling relationship is all about building confidence with each other, learning about each other, developing trust, the client becoming familiar with a counselling culture – silences, boundaries, developing a language around feelings, experiencing self-examining introspection and non-judgmental responses. The counsellor may well be explicit about the role of power in the relationship, and learning that taking responsibility can also be empowering can feel strange.

### **The Middle Stage**

The middle stage of counselling is when you feel safe to take risks, to share more vulnerable aspects of yourself with the counsellor, exploring parts of yourself that you find shameful, negative, unpleasant, weak. The counsellor will also begin to take risks with you, to respectfully challenge you and share some of their feelings if they believe that will be useful to you. It does not have to be grim, there can be genuine laughter, authentic appreciation and affection between counsellor and client and you are absolutely allowed to ask your counsellor how

she is experiencing the relationship. Her answer will have its foundation in what she believes will be beneficial to you.

### **The Flight to Health**

A client told me about her experience with another counsellor:

“I had a counsellor who clearly disapproved of me. My lifestyle was very different from hers, she asked me questions about my lifestyle that had nothing to do with what I was there for, she was just being nosy. She didn’t approve of my anger and more or less told me so, not so much what she said but the faces she pulled when I tried to talk about my feelings. She really pissed me off. So after 3 sessions I decided I was wasting my time and money and called her to cancel the rest of our sessions. I told her I was cured, that she had cured me, and that I didn’t need to see her ever again. She wanted me to come in and spend more money with her to ‘talk about it’ but why would I go back to anyone who was treating me with such contempt?”

The Flight to Health is a theory that when a client responds ‘too quickly’ to therapy they are actually trying to escape to avoid pain and further self disclosure. Sometimes the client will recognize that these feelings are entirely theirs and sometimes they will want to disown parts of those feelings, making the counsellor take responsibility for what feels threatening or contemptuous.

Talk with your counsellor about these feelings: ‘It’s weird, but I suddenly feel fine! I don’t know where the feelings of abject misery have gone,’ is absolutely acceptable as is, “When I talk about parts of my life it seems pretty clear to me that you disapprove, and that pisses me off.” This is all excellent grist to the mill, moving the relationship from the more superficial towards the here and now, your freedom to speak without waiting for permission or having to say the ‘right’ thing. As long as you are not abusive or threatening then everything is relevant and acceptable.

Remember that you have the power and authority to leave the relationship whenever you want and if you feel you are being manipulated into staying when you do not want to you can just not return. Remember too that, just as in every other profession, there are good and bad counsellors. Trust your instincts and explore them, too.

## **How counselling can affect other relationships**

Coming to counselling is very like learning a new language. As you find you are gaining knowledge, not just about yourself but also about this new language, so you may find that you want to share it with other people. It is quite common to begin to diagnose your partner and friends, people on television and in films, your mum and siblings and anyone else you come into contact with. While this is normal it can also be tedious and indeed disconcerting for those people and it is also an abuse of power. I know that sounds extraordinary but it is true: you are gaining specialist knowledge and you are imposing it on people who have not asked for it. More, it is very incomplete knowledge about counselling theory when what you are paying to learn is knowledge about yourself.

It is really tempting to do, student counsellors go through a stage of doing it and are warned not to, so just recognise when the temptation arises and resist it.

In gaining awareness about things like the way in which you think about yourself, how much you value who you are and what you think you are going to get from life you may find that you want something different from what has been normal for you up to this point. This desire can help you get a better paying job, more supportive friends, safely leave an abusive relationship or set better boundaries for your children and it can also make you realise that someone you once loved very much is no longer for you. This can be a difficult process to come to terms with and it is best to take it slowly. Because it is a process there is also the possibility that within a few weeks of wanting to leave your partner you may come comfortably to terms with your situation, becoming able to incorporate new knowledge into a changed but sustained relationship with the same person.

A similar process can occur with jobs, friends and family and other, central aspects of your life. One or two people do throw everything up in the air and run off to live in India but this is often because they cannot maintain their own boundaries and responsibilities. The large majority readjust their perception of their situation and make plans to gently alter aspects of their life to be more comfortable.

## **Specialist Counselling**

I would argue that there are some issues that you might want to seek specialist, agency-based counselling for. Domestic violence counselling requires a great deal of training and specialist supervision because if it moves away from a firm foundation of listening to the client and allowing her to decide what is best in her own unique situation there is a real risk of the client and her children being subjected to greater, often terrible, harm. Sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse and bereavement, perhaps especially the loss of a baby or child, may also be best addressed by a specialist agency.

If you have experienced any of these events you will know that the people you have told responded with horror, offered to sort things out for you in an inappropriate way, felt sorry for you, did not believe you, made ultimatums or became so overwhelmed that you had to care for them. The dynamics of dealing with these subjects can be more complex than wondering about changing your job, and the legislation covering them can be intricate. Many counsellors working privately will have the skills to understand and cope with what you tell them as well as having excellent awareness about how they are affected by people telling them about shocking violence or terrible sadness, and many will not. Rather than take the chance of having to tell your story to two or three counsellors and risk becoming retraumatised on the off chance that one may be able to work with you, you may prefer to go straight to an agency. You will find up to date contact details about agencies in your area on the web or through the library or council.

## **Making friends with your counsellor**

Counsellors cannot become friends with their clients. We should not contact you for non-counselling reasons within 2 years of the end of your therapy. This is to protect you and the counsellor from any misunderstandings and to offer a boundaried, professional relationship.

Because you will be given the space to speak about the most intimate parts of your life you may feel a great deal of warmth and affection towards your counsellor so you may wonder why your counsellor does not reciprocate. Occasionally, they may tell you something about their life as a way of helping you move deeper into your own understanding but in general a therapist will focus entirely on you.

Many clients, particularly clients who are new to therapy, experiencing the intimacy that many of us will have encountered as part of a great friendship, can experience this lack of reciprocity as coldness, aloofness and cruelty. These feelings are an important part of therapy. Whether you profess love or hate, whether you have said it was your birthday or that your mother died or that you are leaving therapy because you hate the therapist, the job of the counsellor is to remain consistent. This does not mean that they do not care but just the opposite: a good counsellor will care very deeply and genuinely for you and in doing so will offer a relationship entirely in service to you.

Beyond the models of expected demeanour individual counsellors will have different ways of being that are important to the work, the foundation of that work being therapeutic authenticity. Some counsellors will talk more than others or, when they feel sorry/angry/helpless/stuck/ elated/anything else will tell you *if it is helpful* to your process. Some will disclose very little.

In time, you will get to know how your counsellor might respond to you and begin to make the most helpful kinds of their responses part of your own life. When, almost as a reflex you say, "Oh I'm so stupid!" you may hear your counsellor say, "You're so stupid? Why?" Then you may begin to say these things to yourself and stop believing that you are stupid. This is what happens when we are young; we are told that certain behaviours are bad, stupid, worthy of respect or love, or whatever else and we internalise these as beliefs about the world. Many of these beliefs are healthy and some are not, they may have been healthy for your dad or teacher or sister but you are not your dad, teacher or sister, and it may take some practice to remember what is right for you rather than for them.



## **The difference between process and talking**

Talking is telling your story. When you begin therapy, and certainly if you visit a number of counsellors to see if you want to work with them, you will tell them why you want counselling which is likely to include some material that is painful or difficult. Sometimes it can be retraumatising, which means that in reliving the event you experience it as if it is happening in the present, and this is one of the times when the counsellor is likely to gently step in to ask how you are experiencing your narrative rather than allowing you to go full speed into it. Catharsis is not always therapeutic.

It takes time to build trust with a counsellor so trust your instincts; that is, be aware of your feelings as you tell your story and respect them. Go as tentatively or as quickly as you like and be aware that the counsellor will trust you, as a responsible adult, to do just that. When you feel that you can trust this relationship to bear what you need to say or do then start saying and doing it and see how it feels.

Processing can be a strange feeling initially and difficult to describe, but imagine something between thinking and sleeping. Rather than having an immediate answer or response you may find your mind drifting in a way that feels as if it is working towards something but you do not know what.

Not knowing is absolutely fine. Not knowing allows you the freedom to begin to discover what you really do know, with the freedom to change what you know at any point. Not knowing can be disconcerting or even frightening because knowing gives us landmarks that guide us through life and makes life simple. Not knowing can turn life as you know it upside down. If life as you know it is painful then having it turned upside down is a stage towards discovering less painful ways to live.

One of my clients spent weeks recounting all of the people who were to blame for the way she lived her life. People who are Black; people who are on benefits; people who are Muslim; people who come from other countries for any reason but in her frame of reference were all illegal immigrants; single mothers; young people; drug addicts and alcoholics; every cliché came pouring out, endlessly. It was not easy to listen to this litany of prejudice not least because it was so repetitive, but she wanted me to hear her and so I did, believing that in speaking this way she was communicating something more than hatred.

Session 18 began in the same manner: someone who wasn't a middle aged White woman had done something or other on the bus and the client began her rant but this time it suddenly ran out of steam, her sentence just drifted away without finishing and she sat in silence looking at nothing in particular, processing. After several minutes she looked up at me and said, "I'm not a very nice person, am I?"

From that point on she concentrated on the fear, unhappiness and disappointment of her life and in doing so moved towards things she wanted – friends who were not absorbed in hatred, a less demeaning job, more rewarding relationships. For her, an absolute knowledge of who was to blame kept her life small and mean. Not knowing gave her freedom that was essential to her mental health.

Processing is one reason why counsellors can leave long periods of silence, to give you space to experience and recognise your own process. It is why consistency and apparent detachment is so important – if your counsellor responds to everything you tell them then the space for you to experience your own feelings as you feel them is very much reduced. Your counsellor offers a new relationship as you process, one that might in optimum circumstances be called ‘reparative’; that is a loving, non-judgmental, genuine response to something that may in the past have been met with less positive reactions.

## Goals

There are no goals for therapy. I’ll say that again because it is such an unusual thing to hear about an activity that is commonly understood to be for the purpose of making you feel better. *There are no goals for therapy.* Therapy does not intend to make you feel better. Therapy aims to give you a space in which a trusting relationship can be built.

Even in Employee Assistance Programme work of 5 sessions many therapists will give you space to go where you want, knowing that just because you arrive in session 1 feeling stressed it is likely that your understanding of why you are stressed will change over 5 weeks. It might be, for instance, that you think you hate your co-worker because he is an idiot and by week 2 your awareness has altered to understand that you are treating him like an idiot. By week 3 you might be becoming aware that you are generally not enjoying work and by week 5, although it is unlikely that you will have made any decisions about leaving work, the heat is off your relationship with your co-worker which would not be the case if you were given a script to deal with him. This is a process many people go through, of coming to counselling for one reason and learning that life is more complex.

The beauty of there being no goals in therapy is that you are totally free within very simple boundaries. For people who are experiencing events as profound as bereavement or domestic violence this is especially important to know, that you can tell and retell your story and also talk about the weather, you’re not expected to talk about any one thing all the time. Bring it all to therapy. Speak about everything with your counsellor. This is all-important material, a great opportunity for insight and awareness.

Despite what many non-counsellors believe counsellors cannot read minds and depend on what the client tells them: if you feel that your counsellor will think you are an idiot or lazy or incredibly astute and wise if you say something, let them know.

## **Endings**

Agencies and counsellors based with your GP are very likely to contract a certain number of sessions with you, usually around 6, sometimes more. The counsellor will loosely manage the trajectory that counselling takes so that your process is safe and contained. When I trained as a counsellor I could not believe that any meaningful work could be done within 6 sessions, that it would be superficial and meaningless. In fact I have found that clients overwhelmingly manage themselves within whatever limitations they are faced with. Clients and I have done superb work within an allocated 5 sessions, not trivially floating around but often reaching depths of understandings and a consistent sense of closure.

There is a general rule about not continuing with the same counsellor after the agency sessions have finished. This is because it is really simple to convince a client that there is huge work yet to be done, that this counsellor will be able to guide you through the minefield, and that the payments will be worth it. In other words, it is easy to abuse power for financial gain. That said, sometimes a client and counsellor will really enjoy working together and achieve a quality of work that the client finds particularly valuable. It is unlikely that the counsellor will broach the subject but you are allowed to. Your counsellor should explain why this is not usually acceptable but, if she feels that there may be good therapeutic reasons for continuing the work, she should insist that this contracted time is finished as planned, that you take at least 4 weeks after the end of the contract to consider how you feel and to experience the changes in your feelings, and that if you still want to return to this relationship that you make the move.

Paying for therapy with a counsellor you have previously seen for free will change the relationship: it was unconditional and now it is conditional upon you paying. That can feel strange - the prostitution analogy is not unknown in counselling - and it can be a process to come to terms with.

In private counselling the relationship moves towards an end when you feel sufficiently whole and sustainably content about who you are. You realise you are sitting with an equal; you are no longer looking to them for answers or advice and you have redeveloped your own capacity and ability to make healthy, wise decisions for yourself. This can happen by session 6 or can take a few years. Feelings of completeness can come and go and when they stay, when you feel peacefully concluded, then it is probably time to draw the relationship to an end.

Speak with your counsellor about your feeling that you might want to end the relationship. Although this is what counselling aims towards it is still a delicate, tender issue for both you and the counsellor. You may well find that once the decision is firmly made that the next session will be your last the issue you

originally brought to counselling returns: that is quite normal, your counsellor will be expecting something like this to occur and she will reassure you that you are now able to deal with it. 9 and a half times out of 10 the problem diminishes very early on in that final session.

## **The Final Session**

This is a time to think carefully about what you want to say to your counsellor. You might want to review what you have achieved together, your awareness about how you have moved from one way of feeling and being to different ways and how you have experienced that process. This can be a conversation of tenderness and appreciation as well as remembering times when things were difficult between you. It is a conversation between equals who are saying goodbye.

## **After Therapy**

You may well feel strange and perhaps a little sad for a while. A relationship of great intimacy where you were accepted exactly as you are is over. It's a loss, but a loss where you have internalized what you and your therapist spoke about, and so have a different outlook on life from when you began. In a way you're taking your therapist with you.

Some people return to therapy throughout their lives – many counsellors do – because they find the therapeutic relationship an ideal place to explore things like ageing, fear of dying and death, children leaving home and other stages of life. Sometimes we just need to visit a person who will hear our secrets without judgment, trust us to do what is best for ourselves and the people around us, and walk part of the way with us when we feel vulnerable or in need of time and attention. In the very best traditions of philosophy and magic, the healthy person seeks to know themselves throughout the events and stages of life, and counselling is one of the few places left where we might do that.

## Glossary

**Congruence** – In Person Centered Theory, therapeutic honesty. The therapist may have many thoughts about what is happening but will only speak about their own feelings if they believe it to be genuinely helpful to the client.

**Counter-transference** - In Psychoanalytic and Psychodynamic Theory, the therapists' feelings about the client, which may be an indication of the clients' process.

**Defense Mechanisms** – In Psychoanalytic Theory, unconscious strategies used to manipulate, deny, or distort reality in order to maintain a way of being that is acceptable to the person and the people around him.

**Drives** – In Psychoanalytic Theory, unconscious motivations with a clear aim e.g. survival, death.

**Ego** – In Psychoanalytic Theory, the part of a person that attempts to find the best way of being between the Id and the Superego. The conscious mind.

**Empathy** – the capacity to recognize feelings that are being experienced by another. "Walking in another persons shoes."

**Id** – In Psychoanalytic Theory, the impulsive, carefree, careless, unconscious part of a person.

**Interpretations** - In Psychoanalytic and Psychodynamic Theory, the therapists' explanation of her understanding of what the client has said.

**Processing** – when a person allows thoughts to come and go without needing an answer. Often a prelude to reaching new understandings.

**Superego** – In Psychoanalytic Theory, the unconscious, restraining part of a person; their conscience.

**Supervision** – a formal meeting between a counsellor and a more experienced colleague during which the counsellors' skills and competence will be developed. Every counsellor, no matter how experienced, seeks supervision because it keeps us up to date and increases our ability.

**Transference** - In Psychoanalytic and Psychodynamic Theory, the inappropriate repetition in the present of a relationship from the past.

**Unconscious** – automatic thoughts, feelings, memories and motivations not available to the conscious mind.