



Counselling: what to expect

Counselling is your choice and you play a key part

" [counselling] is not about someone telling you what to do, instead counselling provides the stepping stones for you to find the answers with some help! You are in control. "

University student.*

Although someone else might suggest or 'refer' you for counselling, going to counselling is your choice. You should be told about the counsellor and the types of things that might happen. Ask for more information if you are not sure.

Counselling starts with an assessment. As part of this, you and the counsellor may talk about what is happening in your life now and things that have happened in the past. This will help give focus to what's important to you. Your counsellor may also want to speak with other key people in your life (school staff, parents/ carers etc.) to understand how you could be best supported.

"You don't have to open up straight away, you have a chance to get to know them."

Secondary / high school student.*

When assessment is complete, if you think counselling could help, you will make an agreement with your counsellor around how to work together in a safe, helpful way. This is known as contracting.

"...if you feel that you are uncomfortable with a particular counsellor, you are allowed to exit that space and find someone that feels more comfortable to speak to."

University student.*

"...after having my own [counselling] sessions I have realised that it's not bad and that the counsellor is not there to judge or imply that something is wrong with you, but rather to help and listen."

Secondary / high school student.*

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What happens in counselling?

"I focused on things that stressed me out the most plus things that didn't feel right to talk about with family and friends such as family issues."

Secondary / high school student.*

You will set some goals around what you would like to focus on. Don't worry if you don't have any at first – your counsellor will help you. The counsellor may suggest different ways to help you express yourself in a way that is most helpful to you, such as talking or art and creative work. You and your counsellor will regularly review how it's going – it's important that you let the counsellor know if counselling is not working for you. You will also talk together about what will happen when you finish counselling.

"I wasn't great at speaking when I first started counselling, so I never expected someone to find a way to listen to me without me actually speaking, but my counsellor did find a way."

University student.*

"although it seems scary at first, (...) talking to someone about your problems feels good. You also do fun activities like colouring, painting etc."

Secondary / high school student.*



Who needs to know?

"There is never any pressure to share anything you don't want to."

Secondary / high school student.*

"Don't worry that a counsellor would say anything to other people as they keep everything private unless you or someone else was at risk or not safe"

Secondary / high school student.*

"Counselling was not what I expected it to be. I thought they would tell my parents everything"

Secondary / high school student.*

Counselling is confidential. However, if your counsellor is concerned for your or somebody else's safety they will have to tell someone else to help keep you safe. Your counsellor will tell you who needs to know, what needs to be shared, ask if you want to be involved in sharing this information and involve you in the next steps.

Counselling works best when there is a team of key people around you who can support (such as your parents/carers and teachers). It may therefore be useful to involve these people when reviewing and ending your counselling. However, you should be fully involved in what is shared with others.

* Many thanks to all the young people that shared their experiences of counselling with us and allowed us to use their words to help create this document.