

Counseling Demystified

By G. Raymond McCullough

I pondered for several weeks what I could write about that would be of interest to the reader and serve as useful information. I am full of ideas...sometimes so many it's difficult to make a decision. Nonetheless, in an an ah ha moment I said why not write about the obvious. The obvious being what I and my colleagues do on a daily basis. Our chosen vocation and profession. I gained greater commitment to writing on this topic because on a daily basis I hear misconceptions about counseling from prospective and current clients. I suspect these misconceptions sometimes serve as a barrier to individuals pursuing counseling. Hopefully by the end of the article counseling or at least drug and alcohol counseling will be demystified.



Counseling is defined as professional guidance in resolving personal conflicts and emotional problems. The term counselor is defined as a person who counsels.

There are many different types of counseling. The following is a sample list of

more than 50 types of counseling identified on one website:

| | | |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Alcohol | Career | Christian |
| Credit | Crisis | Cross-cultural |
| Disaster | Disciplinary | Drug |
| Education | Family | Genetic |
| Grief | Intervention | Marriage |
| Mental Health | Pastoral | Peer |
| Relationship | Rehabilitation | Sexual trauma |
| Spiritual | Trauma | Vocational |

This list can add to the confusion about counseling. This is especially true if you don't know exactly what type of counseling to seek. Sometimes the problem is obvious and you clearly know where to look for assistance. If you are not so certain, a close friend or advisor can be of help. If neither one of these options is available seek out someone that focuses on general counseling. The hope here is if the areas that you are attempting to address are out that counselor's scope of practice and expertise they will refer you to a counselor that can help you. Let me caution you at this point, not all counselors and counseling agencies hold equal competence and expertise. Thus as a consumer of counseling services you have to pick the counselor and agency that will meet your individual needs. Unfortunately, some people don't have a wide choice of options because of limited resources. Additionally, if a person is involved in the legal system, if they are receiving publicly funded services, or they are accessing services through insurance coverage they may be directed to a specific agency. Regardless, if you have to receive services at a particular agency you still have the right to choose a counselor that you believe will best meet your needs.

Let's explore what you should consider when looking for and choosing a counselor:

1. Ask yourself some questions:
 - a. Are you looking for group or individual counseling?
 - b. What issues do you want to work on?
 - c. What do you hope to accomplish?
 - d. Does it make a difference if the counselor is male or female?
 - e. When are you available for sessions and what locations are convenient for you?
 - f. Can you pay for the counseling service and/or are there programs to assist in payment?
2. Once you have answered the above questions make a list of the counselors and agencies in your area.
3. Talk to friends, family, and others who may be able to refer you to a counselor or give you feedback on the list you compiled.
4. Contact the counselor or agency and interview them. If you have options let them know you are shopping around. If possible talk with one of the agency's counselors to get a sense of them and their work.
5. You have the right to ask questions. Some questions you might ask are:
 - a. What is your training?
 - b. How long have you been a counselor?
 - c. Do you have Washington State registration, certification, or license?
 - d. What issues do you work with?
 - e. What do you specialize in?
 - f. What experience do you have with the issues that I want to work on?
 - g. Can you help me?
 - h. If not, will you refer me to another counselor?
 - i. How would we work together on issues and how long will it take?
6. Make a decision on where you want to receive services. I encourage you to trust your gut instinct! No amount of training, paperwork or government regulation can ever substitute for your own personal sense of what is best for you.
7. Once you are in counseling remember the following:
 - a. Talk regularly to your counselor about your progress. You have a right to ask questions and to receive answers to them.
 - b. You, the client, are always in charge of your process. You have the right to refuse what your counselor is offering you. You have the right to change counselors and/or counseling approaches.
 - c. Sexual conduct and/or contact between counselor and client is **NEVER** acceptable conduct.
 - d. Outside relationships such as business, friendship and socializing with your counselor are also not acceptable because they create barriers in the counseling process.
 - e. Do you feel that you are connecting with your counselor? Because you are confronting difficult issues in your life feelings of discomfort **are to be expected. However,** feeling unsafe with your counselor is a major warning sign to seek services elsewhere.

Lastly, I want to share my personal philosophy about drug and alcohol counseling by sharing a piece I wrote many years ago. I often share it with the clients that I have the privilege to assist.

My job as a counselor is to assist you...to lead and guide you through the immediate challenges presented in your life...primarily your substance abuse, your alcohol and/or drug dependence. I am the force that prompts and encourages you to confront any self-delusion, fears, and self-destructive behavior that perpetuates failure and dissatisfaction in your life. Together we will set out confronting the lifestyle that supports your continued substance abuse and active addiction. I will encourage you to look at yourself in ways that you have never thought possible. I will help you identify and focus on your strengths so you can overcome your perceived weaknesses. Your perceptions of yourself and others will be key to our alliance. We will focus on your thoughts and feelings that lead to behaviors. We will confront the behaviors that are self-defeating.

I have no intention or desire to re-parent you. I am a counselor (mentor and coach) that will unselfishly guide you in the process of starting to manifest your life in a way that you may never have imagined possible. There will be times that you think I am harsh and difficult. Let there be no mistake that your perceptions are your reality and I cannot take them away. There will be times that you will feel you are not being believed because your responses to questions will be followed up with another question and maybe many more. The questions must be asked to facilitate understanding for myself and for you. Trust is important in this counselor and client relationship.

It is a relationship of give and take...we must trust each other. You must trust that I have your best interest in mind and I must

trust that you will open yourself to my guidance and help.

Lifestyle CHANGE is key and it is our goal. Sometimes external changes can only occur when internal ones happen first. These internal changes are your thoughts and feelings. Become best friends with your thoughts and feelings because they will assist in the changes that are desired.

The period of time we work together may be short. Therefore, I encourage you to make the best of our time together by committing yourself to making CHANGES--as small and as insignificant as they may seem.

I'm in your corner and cheering you on!



This article was inspired by and is dedicated to the thousands of individuals that I have had the privilege to counsel over the years.