

Choosing a counsellor or psychotherapist

by Heather Dale

Introduction

People are becoming increasingly in favour of having counselling or psychotherapy. In an independent survey commissioned by BACP, 95% of those who responded agreed that 'it is a good idea to seek counselling or psychotherapy for a problem before it gets out of hand', while 83% agreed that people might be happier if they talked to a counsellor or psychotherapist about their problems (Carol Goldstone Associates 2010).

This information sheet is written for those of you, and your family or friends, who are considering therapy. The information given is aimed chiefly at those who are over 18 years old.

First of all, it describes what therapy is, and what sort of issues it can help with. This will help you decide whether therapy is what you are looking for.

Next it looks at the very many different sorts of professionals who offer emotional help, and give examples of each. Many of the job titles are very similar, so it can be helpful to understand what the different titles mean. This section will help you decide who can best help you.

The third section briefly looks at issues of therapist training and gives some explanations of the basic training requirements for therapists, as it stands currently, and as it may be in the future.

Then the information sheet moves on to how to start searching for a therapist, and the ways in which they can be found.

Near the end of this document, there is a checklist of useful questions to ask a potential therapist, and right at the end there are some addresses of useful organisations who offer therapy.

The information sheet is written in the form of questions and answers in order that a particular question may be looked at. Throughout, the terms therapy and therapist are used to include both counselling and counsellors, and psychotherapy and psychotherapists.

Although this information sheet has been commissioned and written by members of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, not all counsellors are members of this association. However, BACP members/registrants are bound by the BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* & subject to the BACP Professional Conduct Procedure. This offers a framework of best practice which BACP therapists should offer to clients.

I don't quite understand what therapy or counselling is. Can you help?

A counsellor or a psychotherapist is someone who is employed, either in a voluntary or paid capacity, to use their skills in order to help others understand or explore their emotional problems.

The BACP definition of counselling/psychotherapy states that "Counselling and psychotherapy are umbrella terms that cover a range of talking therapies. They are delivered by trained practitioners who work with people over a short or long term to help them bring about effective change and/or enhance their wellbeing".

How do I know if I need to see a therapist?

Therapy can be helpful when feeling painful emotions, facing difficult decisions, in order to improve or change relationships, or to help in developing a better understanding of self and/or others. In particular, therapy may be helpful if:

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- Something particularly unsettling has happened (such as bereavement, a redundancy, or a change of relationship), and help offered by friends and family is not enough, or not available.
- There has been something that occurred in the past that has not been dealt with, and is now interfering with daily life. This may be a particular trauma that happened in childhood or later life, such as the death or illness of an important person in your life, or it may be something that happened over a long period, such as being bullied or abused in childhood (and perhaps beyond).

However, it is worth remembering that there are many things therapists may not be able to help with. Here is a check list of what therapists can and cannot do, to help you decide how to proceed.

In addition, whichever route you are taking, most therapists will be open to an initial conversation to explore whether or not counselling, and their particular approach to it, is right for particular people.

What therapists can do

- Offer a safe and confidential space to help explore emotionally-based problems
- Help you make sense of your world
- Help you to explore feelings and thoughts, in order to resolve emotional distress
- Help you towards a better understanding of self and others, which in turn may lead to an improved ability to relate to others.

In addition, skilled therapists will:

- Make sure, as far as possible, that there are no interruptions during sessions
- Be reliable about times of meetings
- Keep confidences, within boundaries which they will explain to you
- Take care of themselves by having a safe place for themselves to discuss issues (sometimes called supervision)
- Set and maintain the boundaries of the relationship, and explain these to you early on. See also C4 What does my Counsellor mean by Professional Boundaries (BACP Information Sheet).

What therapists do not do

- Prescribe drugs – only an appropriate medical practitioner can do this
- Offer help with practical problems, such as financial or housing issues

- Unless working in a specialised service, they are unlikely to have specific information about health-related problems
- Meet outside pre-planned sessions
- Talk in detail about their own problems.

How do I know whether a counsellor or therapist has been properly trained?

As the law stands at the moment, anyone can call themselves a therapist, or a counsellor with absolutely no training whatsoever. BACP recommends that you check for yourself the qualifications and experience of potential therapists. This can be done by asking the therapist, or you can check the BACP Register at www.bacpregister.org.uk. BACP's Register provides access to professionals who are committed to providing a good standard of care and strikes off those who do not. The Register provides a valuable way to choose a practitioner who is competent and who behaves in an ethical manner. BACP therapists also have to work to an Ethical Framework, and can be subject to a Complaints Procedure, if they are found to have breached their ethical responsibilities.

All BACP therapists who advertise their services in the BACP Finding a Therapist Directory have demonstrated that they are BACP members who have completed a minimum of a one year full time or two to three years' part-time training, which includes a number of hours in a practice placement and therefore have achieved both theoretical and practical experience. Non-BACP members must be a member of another professional body.

I am worried that if I talk about myself someone else might get to hear

All properly-trained therapists will listen to you in confidence, and will not gossip about what you have said. However, there are certain circumstances (for example, if you are likely to hurt someone) when they may feel they have to break your confidentiality. Many therapists will talk you through the limits to confidentiality during the first session, but if not – ask.

OK, I think I would benefit from seeing a therapist. I don't want to ask my GP, or go through work, so how do I go about finding a charity or a therapist in private practice?

BACP offers an online search for therapists in particular areas. Many, but not all, counsellors and charities advertise, so a good place to start a search is through local directories, or through an online search. BACP offers an online search for therapists in particular areas, as do other specialised organisations. Examples of

some organisational websites can be found at the end of this sheet, although this list is not comprehensive. Voluntary organisations may be accessed through local councils and the Citizen's Advice Bureaux (CAB).

What is the difference between counsellors and psychotherapists?

It is best to ask the practitioner or the service providing the counselling or psychotherapy about their specific terms and way of working. Getting a good "fit" between what is being offered and what you need is very important.

There are a number of titles used by talking therapists

To help, here are some definitions commonly used in the UK:

- Psychiatrist – a psychiatrist is **always** a trained and qualified doctor, who has specialist training in diagnosing mental health problems. Psychiatrists are also trained in the use of drugs for mental health disorders. So a psychiatrist will diagnose the problem, and may prescribe drugs to help ease the symptoms. Usually they work in, or will be attached to, a hospital. Expected attendance varies, but is likely to be irregular, perhaps monthly to six weekly.
- Clinical Psychologist – clinical psychologists are trained in *behavioural sciences*. This means they are able to help examine unwanted behaviours and explain how these might be changed. Like psychiatrists, they are most often found working in hospitals or NHS clinics. Often, a psychiatrist or General Practitioner (GP) will refer people to a psychologist. Expected attendance varies from once-weekly to once a month or so.
- Psychoanalyst – psychoanalysts are trained to help clients explore and analyse in depth their own unconscious defences and internal conflicts. Once these are understood, then it is easier to change unwanted behaviours, or develop more useful ones. People who choose this route should be able and willing to commit to meeting with the analyst two or three times each week, for a long period, perhaps for several years.

- Counsellor and Psychotherapist: these are generic terms that cover therapists providing a wide variety of psychological help. They are likely to help clients understand themselves, their behaviours and relationships with others. Generally, sessions last between 50 minutes to an hour, and are likely to be weekly, although this can be negotiated.

Therapists may use specialist techniques, for example, an art therapist would use art as a means of exploring feelings and thinking, and others may offer specialist treatment, for example, for addiction or depression.

Where do therapists work?

Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists both work in hospitals and you might be referred to them through the NHS (for example, your GP) or through a private doctor. It is quite hard to access them in any other way (see Table 1). All psychiatrists and psychologists work with individuals, and some will also work with couples and groups.

Counsellors and psychotherapists (both called therapists in this sheet) most often work outside hospitals, and in a wide variety of setting including doctors' surgeries, mental-health centres, voluntary agencies, organisations, schools, further education, the workplace and in private practice.

Within these categories, some therapists will only see individuals, whilst others will be trained to work with couples or groups.

Other types of therapists including complementary therapists

There are many other occupations in which people are described as being therapists or counsellors, such as genetic counsellors or health counsellors. This usually implies a specialist knowledge in one area, and will incorporate advice and information. Whilst this can be extremely useful, it is outside the remit of this information sheet. That is because it is mainly concerned with people who are suffering from problems that have an emotional basis.

How do I find a therapist?

For many people, word of mouth is the best possible recommendation, but this is not always possible. There are four other common routes into therapy. In this

Table 1

Access to talking therapies in the UK				
Title	Medically trained?	Funded	Access to my notes?	Session-length and duration
Psychiatrist	Yes	NHS or private	At discretion of practitioner	Variable
Psychologist	No	NHS or private	At discretion of practitioner	Usually an hour every couple of months or so
Psycho-analyst	No	NHS or private		50 minutes or an hour several times a week
Psychotherapist/ counsellor (psychodynamic)	No	NHS, through work, charities or voluntary organisation or private	Always in private practice, otherwise at discretion of practitioner	Sessions usually weekly, for 50 minutes or an hour
(CBT)	No	NHS, through work, charities or voluntary organisation or private		Variable. Can include homework, or tasks that have to be completed between sessions
Psychotherapist/ counsellor	No	NHS, through work, charities or voluntary organisation or private		Sessions usually last either 50 minutes or an hour, but time between sessions is negotiable.

section, there is a brief explanation of the advantages and disadvantages of each.

The four ways are: through GPs (or otherwise through the NHS); through an Employee Assistance Programme; funding your therapy privately; or through a charitable organisation. In addition, students and staff may be able to access services at their schools, colleges, or universities.

1. GP or other NHS-funded organisations

Many GP surgeries offer a free (at the point of delivery) counselling service to patients. Referral to the service is via the GP. There are also NHS mental health clinics, where clients may be referred by other NHS staff. Some of these will be located in a hospital, whilst others may be in separate buildings. In addition there are some specialist services, such as the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) where referral may be through a variety of sources, including schools or Social Services.

Counsellors working in NHS clinics are normally trained and experienced. You will not have to pay directly, as they will be employed by an NHS provider.

Advantages

- This is a service which is free at point of delivery
- Counsellors are likely to be trained and qualified.

Disadvantages

- There may be a waiting list of several weeks, which can be a long time
- The number of sessions is very likely to be limited to six or 10 sessions
- There may not be a choice of therapist
- Because referral is through the NHS there will be a formal record of treatment.

2. Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) and staff counselling services

Employee Assistance Programmes are private organisations who offer, amongst other services, a counselling service to large employers. The employer pays the EAP to provide a confidential counselling service for employees who are having problems, which, usually but not always are affecting their working practice. When the employee contacts the EAP, they will refer them to one of a network of counsellors in their area. Staff counselling services are an in-house service.

Sometimes employers need to get permission from their line managers to access this, but often it is offered as a confidential service, which any employer can access at any time.

Advantages

- This is a free service at the point of delivery
- There is usually a phone help-line as a first point of contact
- There is unlikely to be a waiting list
- The counsellor is likely to have an understanding of work-place issues.

Disadvantages

- The numbers of sessions is likely to be limited
- Line managers may need to be informed that you are seeing a therapist.

3. Therapists in private practice

Many therapists work partly or wholly in private practice. This means that contact is made directly to the therapist, rather than through an intermediary.

Private therapists often have websites which contain basic information. Remember that the purposes of these websites are to advertise a service, and that it is usually best to have an initial chat before committing to a course of therapy. See section below, what should I ask a potential therapist?

Advantages

- Allows choice of available therapists (although this may involve waiting until the therapist you have chosen is available)
- Except under exceptional circumstances, nobody need know that you are seeking help
- The number of sessions available is likely to be open-ended
- Some people feel more in charge of a service when they are paying directly.

Disadvantages

- It is not free, although costs vary and may be negotiable
- Potential clients need to do their own quality checking
- There is likely to be a charge for missed or cancelled sessions.

4. Charitable organisations and other local community services

Some charities or local organisations, such as Mind offer a free counselling service. Sometimes you may be asked to pay a small fee or make a donation, so

do check the organisation's policy beforehand. Most areas will have the following agencies: Relate (who offer couples and relationship counselling) Cruse, (Bereavement counselling) and Mind (counselling for mental-health problems). The Samaritans offer a telephone listening service, but they do not offer therapy. Referrals vary – some offer a drop-in service other agencies require referrals from the NHS – it may be best to contact them and ask how to access the service.

Advantages

- Likely to be a free service, or charge according to means
- Except under exceptional circumstances, confidentiality may be assured.

Disadvantages

- Numbers of sessions are often limited
- Charities can be problem-specific (eg Cruse only deals with bereavement problems) so it can be hard to find the right service.

Once the decision has been made to begin therapy it is worth spending a few minutes, either beforehand, or at the first session, making sure that what is being offered is what is expected. Consequently, some good questions to ask the therapist might be:

- What experience and qualifications do you have?
- Are you on a register accredited by the Professional Standards Authority (The Authority)?
- Do you adhere to a code of ethics?
- Do I need specialist help for a particular problem, such as an eating disorder or sexual issue and if so can you meet this need?
- If so, are you experienced in this, or willing to learn with me?
- How confidential is the therapy? Are there any limits on our confidentiality?
- What techniques are likely to be used?
- Will the number of sessions be limited or open-ended?
- How often (how many times a week/month) will I be expected to come?
- What techniques are you likely to employ?
- Will it be the same day and time for every appointment, or can this be negotiated?
- What happens if I miss a session?
- Does your availability match mine?
- Is the location accessible?
- Is there a waiting room if I come early?
- Will I be expected to pay for my sessions and if so, what are your charges and how will you want me to pay?

Do I really need to ask all of these questions?

It is important that, before therapy begins, the therapist and client clearly understand and agree on what they expect from each other. These questions may help to reach that understanding, but they are simply examples of what might be asked.

Many organisations and therapists provide an initial 'intake' or 'assessment' session in which most, perhaps all, of these questions will be discussed.

Many therapists are likely to give an explanation of what can be expected which will answer most, perhaps all, of the questions.

It is, however, very important to feel comfortable enough to talk openly to a therapist, and the way in which the first session goes can be an important way of deciding whether or not to continue.

Conclusion

This brief guide has given you some help in working through the different kinds of counselling and therapy help currently available. It is not an exhaustive list, but it provides an introduction into how to go about looking for a therapist.

This guide has stressed the importance of using a properly trained and skilled therapist. Whilst training, qualifications, and adherence to an ethical framework, that is available to clients, are vitally important, it is also very important to feel safe, respected and liked by the therapist.

About the author

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References

- BACP (2016) Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions, BACP, Lutterworth
- Kent, R. (2016) What do Counsellors and Psychotherapists Mean by "professional boundaries"? BACP Information Sheet C4. Lutterworth: BACP

Further reading

- Roxburgh, T. (2016) How to Get The Best Out Of Your Therapist. BACP Information Sheet C1. Lutterworth: BACP
- O'Driscoll, P. (2016) What Are Counselling and Psychotherapy? BACP Information Sheet C2. Lutterworth: BACP
- Joseph, S. et al. (2016) What to Expect When being Counselling for Post-traumatic Stress. BACP Information Sheet C5. Lutterworth: BACP

Dinnage, R. (1988) One-to-One. Penguin

Yalom, I. (1991) Love's Executioner. Penguin

Useful websites

- www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk (accessed July 2016)
- www.bacpregister.org.uk (accessed July 2016)
- contact@mind.org.uk (accessed July 2016)
- www.relate.org.uk (accessed July 2016)
- www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk (accessed July 2016)

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It should be noted that this information sheet offers broad guidance, which sets out professional good practice, but it should not be substituted for legal and other professional advice, including supervision, applicable to your particular circumstances.

BACP is aware that law and practice are always in a process of development and change. If you have evidence that this information sheet is now inaccurate or out of date feel free to contact us. If you know of any impending changes that affect its content we would also be pleased to hear from you.