

## For men: how counselling works

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About twice as many women as men use counselling. Research\* indicates that more men would see a counsellor if they knew in advance the 'nuts and bolts' of what's involved.

For a start, here are four important basic points to consider:

- **A professional counsellor will treat you with kindness and respect at all times.**

They are not there to judge you or find fault. The counsellor's job is to listen carefully in order to understand what the problem is, and then build a purposeful conversation to support you in resolving it in a positive way. Everything you discuss is private and confidential. (If you are in serious danger or someone close to you is being harmed or is at risk, then the contract of confidentiality will need to be changed to protect your well-being and the safety of others.)

- **An effective counsellor will make sure it's clear what you want to get from counselling and how they could help you achieve this.**

Although counselling is not often a 'quick-fix' solution to a problem, you are of course entitled to know how the sessions could benefit you realistically in the short-term.

- **Not all counsellors work in the same way – some are quite formal, others are more lively.**

What matters most is whether you think the counsellor understands you enough and is a safe person you can trust. At the end of the first meeting (usually called an assessment), you and your counsellor should both agree on the next step, such as being referred to a specialist, or deciding that one session was enough for the time being.

- **You don't have to be ill or clinically depressed to see a counsellor or therapist.**

And it doesn't mean you're a 'nutcase' or 'strange'. Every day, with the back-up of good therapeutic counselling, men from all walks of life find constructive ways to deal with their problems.

\*Millar, A. (2003): "Entering the unknown: men's experience of considering counselling", *CPR (Counselling and Psychotherapy Research)* 3 (1), British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

## What problems can counselling solve?

You might think your particular personal problem is not the 'right kind' for counselling. In fact, whatever it is, the counsellor will listen and take it seriously.

When men recognise a problem, we tend to look for practical things to do to sort it out. If it's psychological or emotional, talking with a counsellor is often an effective way to figure out the best solution.

**It's also important to realise that counselling is not just about 'fixing' what's wrong with your life.**

There are times when your problem-solving skills don't match the situation you're in, so you need to discover a different method to see you safely through. This is what counselling can provide: a constructive new way of looking at your experience and abilities.

Every man has a unique personal story to tell but we all endure similar troubles as we go through life. Below is a list (in no special order) of the sort of issues, big and small, that men talk about in counselling:

*anxiety • family conflict • depression • retirement • becoming a father • step-parenting • traumatic events • anger • bereavement • panic attacks • loss of confidence • racism • separation & divorce • intimate relationships • long-term illness • stress at work • obsessions • suicidal feelings • violence • alcohol & other drugs • self-harm • sexual identity • bullying • midlife crisis*

Maybe none of those headings applies to you but you're still thinking about seeing a therapist because life gets you down and you don't know why. There's no need to put a label on your problem. The main thing to remember is: you don't have to face it alone.

### ***Don't rule yourself out***

Counselling is used by men of all kinds, of any age and ability, from all social classes and many ethnic groups. Men with 'different' sexual identities or unconventional lifestyles are also welcomed. Most counsellors are trained to be aware of prejudice and discrimination and will offer to help you whatever your personal background.

## What puts some men off counselling?



When there's a serious problem in your life or you're highly stressed, it can help to talk it over with someone in your family or a close friend. But what if you don't want anyone to know how bad you really feel? Or perhaps there's nobody around to speak to whom you can trust. It might just feel safer to stay inside your shell.

Feeling isolated adds to the pressure. Eventually, something has to give. A lot of men in this kind of situation end up at the doctor's surgery with strange headaches or gut pain and other unexplained physical symptoms. For some men, appropriate medical treatment from a reliable GP is enough to get them back on track. But prescription pills (such as Prozac) don't always make the anxiety and misery go away, so the doctor might refer you to a psychological counsellor or therapist.

This is the tough bit. Some of us find it very hard to ask for help. For example, it's often said that a 'typical man' hates asking for directions when he's lost. There's some truth in this generalisation. **Most of us have grown up with the familiar myth that a man must be strong, independent, and in charge of himself at all times.**

Even though this image of manliness is impossible to live up to, if a man admits he's losing the plot and can't cope, he probably feels weak and ashamed. He's also likely to believe that if he shows his weakness someone will walk all over him. Who needs that?

No wonder we tend to hide our masculine insecurities. Telling a counsellor about that part of yourself can be pretty scary if you've never really owned up to it before. **But the truth is: it's not 'unmanly' to feel lost or defeated sometimes – it's just human.**

## How does 'talking about things' actually help?

- The main benefit is the chance to speak freely about what's troubling you, to be accepted and listened to properly. Few people really listen without wanting something in return. What a counsellor provides is "a truly special deal," as one man put it: "I knew my counsellor was always there for me, whatever mood I was in – no strings attached."

- It's good to talk, but many men find it hard to open up. Realising it's safe to put your private thoughts and hidden feelings into words can be a huge relief. This positive atmosphere of honesty and safety is very important in counselling. **Whether you're in a rut or a crisis, it helps you bring some balance back into your life and creates a sense of control.**

- Individual psychology is a useful tool when you want to work on understanding your behaviour. Using the counsellor as a guide, you can soon grow more skilful at exploring the way you think and feel – in other words, you gain better self-knowledge.

- **Counselling is not always about facing your demons or making big changes.** Sometimes it's just calm, solid support that's needed until things work out all right. Talking confidentially on a regular basis naturally makes you feel less alone when the going gets rough.

- Also, receiving feedback from a skilled listener puts your difficulties into perspective so you can draw up a realistic plan to tackle them. This not only helps restore your confidence and self-esteem, it also gives you fresh tactics for overcoming problems in the future.

**Counselling is not a soft option – it can be truly challenging. The moves you choose to make to improve your daily life or cope with difficult situations, often require the courage to do things differently. Facing your doubts and fears in therapy might feel risky at first but it's a sure way to rediscover your genuine strengths and put them into action.**

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