

Guidelines for those Seeking Counselling

Whoever you are, whatever your age, whatever the situation or problem which you are facing; whether you are worried, depressed, confused, feeling bad about yourself, wanting to make some changes in your life or coping with unwanted change or crisis, it can help to talk things over, in confidence, with an understanding 'outsider'. Good objective listening is the basis of all counselling. Some counsellors specialise in particular concerns (eg marital, sexual, bereavement, education, vocational) but many are generalist counsellors who regard it as a part of their counselling to help you consider all aspects of your situation and all the possible sources of help.

This kind of talking about what is on your mind can help you discover more about yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, values and priorities and not only to find your own solutions but also to carry them out; to take some action for yourself. You can expect a good counsellor to respect you and not to impose opinions on you nor make decisions for you. Do not expect to be told what to do. Good counselling is essentially a lively, human, personal and mutual exchange between two people; it is a process, which requires commitment of time and effort by both parties, though the number of meetings needed will vary with individual circumstances. The aim is to help you to find your own answers and to become more in charge of your life rather than less so. It is quite different from other kinds of help when you become, appropriately at times, the object of diagnosis or assessment and are told what to do. In some more specialised forms of counselling, however, the counsellor may decide to give you some very definite instructions to help you overcome a specific difficulty, but only after you have together explored your situation very thoroughly and both agreed on a particular course of action.

As one of the aims of counselling is to help you if you are confused, you do not have to be clear what your problem is, or indeed, as to whether you have one or not. A good counsellor will help you to overcome any difficulties you may have in expressing yourself and will accept that you may need to modify what you say, not just once, but repeatedly until you feel you have got it right. It can, however, sometimes help you to find the right kind of counselling and to make the best use of the initial session to think about the following questions:

- What is wrong?
- How long has this been going on?
- How widely does it affect my life?
- Is it about feelings or actions or both?
- Does it involve others who might also want or need counselling?
- What do I hope the result of counselling will be?

If, on the other hand, you feel very clear about your situation and what you want out of counselling, bear in mind that your expectations are unlikely to be met perfectly and be prepared to examine them as part of the counselling process.

The initial session with a counsellor is usually an opportunity to discuss whether continued counselling would be appropriate to your needs and is without obligation on either side. You may just want to talk, but at some stage, you need to ask about practical things like time, place, cost and duration of sessions. Feel free to ask any questions you wish, as you need to know where you stand and to satisfy yourself that this is a person whom you feel you would be able to trust and with whom you would like to work. Be prepared to give as complete and honest a picture of your circumstances as you can, so that you can decide whether what the counsellor can offer will match your needs. If you decide that counselling is not going to be right for you, it does not mean that there is necessarily something wrong with you. It may be just that another counsellor would be more suitable or that you need a different kind of help.

Counselling sometimes makes you feel worse before you feel better! It can involve talking about painful things. However, unless you feel strongly that the counselling, which you receive, is completely wrong for you, do give it a chance to work. Just as you would not be hasty about entering into counselling, do not be hasty in withdrawing from it. It is difficult to judge your own progress, but at the very least, if you feel that you are both communicating, are really in touch with each other (and this may take more than one session) then something worthwhile is taking place. You can discuss whether to continue for an agreed but limited number of sessions and then to review the situation, or you can discuss other sources of help.