



# **Counselling for Depression**

## **What skills can service users expect their therapists to have?**

This document has been adapted by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy from the service-users' guide for Humanistic Psychological therapies:

Roth A.D, Hill A and Pilling S (2009) Humanistic psychological therapies: What skills can service users expect their therapists to have?

## **What is counselling for depression?**

Counselling is a type of psychological therapy that can help people with emotional difficulties and problems in relating to people. There are many different types of counselling. What is described here is a particular type of counselling that has been developed to help people suffering from depression. There are also other types of psychological therapy available to help with depression.

### **Depression**

Depression can affect people in lots of different ways. Typical symptoms are: loss of interest and enjoyment in ordinary things; feeling tired, tearful and irritable; wanting to be alone; loss of interest in sex; not being able to sleep; loss of appetite; not being able to concentrate. These symptoms often come with feelings of guilt, worthlessness and low self-esteem, along with loss of confidence and feelings of helplessness. It is estimated that about 2.6% of adults in the U.K. suffer from depression and 11.4% suffer from a mixture of anxiety and depression.

### **Counselling**

Counselling assumes that people have a natural tendency to develop to their full potential – it's as though people have an inner sense of what's best for them and can usually find their own way forward. When someone develops psychological difficulties counselling assumes that (in some way) they have lost touch with this natural tendency, and that they may benefit from help to get back on track. Counselling believes that two things make this process of recovery more likely:

- a) the development of a trusting relationship between the counsellor and client – because without this it is very difficult for clients to get in touch with how they think and feel. The counsellor aims to make sure that the client feels accepted and understood - clients should feel that their counsellor is listening carefully to their concerns, and that their counsellor is not judging them in any way.
  
- b) rather than focussing on symptoms counselling sees the client as a whole person and tries to understand their “world” from their point of view.

Counselling places a special emphasis on building up a trusting and understanding therapeutic relationship. This is because it believes that this is the starting point for helping clients, and that without this trusting relationship change is unlikely to happen.

### **How does it work?**

Counselling tends to see depression as primarily an emotional problem. Being overly critical of ourselves, feeling we are worthless and being left with unresolved feelings from difficult relationships can make us feel low and depressed. Counselling aims to help people get in touch with the feelings underlying their depression, to express these, make sense of them and develop new ways of looking at themselves and the world around them. This is achieved by counsellors focusing on how you feel and understanding your situation from your point of view. Counselling sessions will often involve you taking the

lead and the counsellor following what you wish to talk about in a thoughtful and understanding manner.

## **What does counselling involve?**

Everyone's counselling will be a bit different, but we have tried to describe some of the important things that a good counsellor will do and what they will help you focus on.

### **Starting off**

Counsellors aim to help you feel respected and to create a setting in which you feel comfortable to talk. Many people find it difficult to speak about their problems with someone they do not know, and it is important that your counsellor can make you feel that they are to be trusted, and can help you manage if you talk about things which upset you or about which you feel embarrassed.

Talking openly about yourself for the first time to a new person can feel difficult and you may be worried about what your counsellor thinks about you. Your counsellor will help you to make sense of any worries you may have about starting counselling. They should give you the feeling that they know that starting therapy can be difficult and also a sense that they understand what life is like for you.

### **Getting a picture of what you need**

Your counsellor will usually try to get a good a picture of what you are finding difficult in your life and how this is affecting you and people close to you. They may ask some questions, but you can expect them to make it clear that you only need to give as much information as you feel comfortable with. Many people find that as counselling gets going they are able to talk more openly and you shouldn't find yourself under pressure to say more than you want.

Although your counsellor will need to gather some basic information about you and your life, most of the time they will let you take the lead. This is because they are interested in finding out how you see and feel about things, rather than asking you lots of questions.

### **Explaining how counselling might work for you**

Early on your counsellor should explain how the approach works, and help you to think about how it might help you. For example, getting in touch with how you feel about yourself or about other people could help you consider ways of dealing with things differently. It could also make it easier to accept things which are difficult but ultimately can't be changed. The early stages are about learning to trust your counsellor and letting them get to know more about you. At first you may not be 100% convinced that counselling is for you. This is not unusual and you may need to experience one or two sessions to fully make your mind up.

### **Sharing ideas about what you want to achieve**

Some people start counselling with clear ideas about what they want to work on; other people may be less clear (for example, they may feel troubled, but not sure why). Working with your counsellor will help to develop your ideas about the areas to start focusing on. Of course, these ideas may change over time, so your counsellor will be flexible and focus on any new issues which arise. The main point is for you to be working with your therapist on matters which are important to you.

### **What can you expect of your counsellor?**

Your counsellor is responsible for ensuring that your sessions take place at a regular time, in a setting where you can be sure of confidentiality. Wherever possible they ought to let you know if they expect to be away or need to change the time of your sessions.

### **Length and frequency of therapy**

There may be some variation in the number of sessions of counselling you are offered according to the way your local service is run. However it is worth bearing in mind that for mild to moderate depression 6–10 sessions are recommended over a period of 8–12 weeks. In cases of more serious depression up to 20 sessions of counselling are recommended. In most NHS services it is likely that you will be seen once a week for about 50-60 minutes. In some cases counselling sessions may be offered on a less frequent basis, for example fortnightly rather than weekly. There should be a clear agreement between you and your counsellor on these arrangements.

### **Ending in counselling**

Your counsellor ought to make sure that you are clear about the number of sessions available and when counselling will end. They will want to know how you feel about ending counselling and give you time to talk about this. For example, some people find that ending in counselling brings up feelings of sadness because it reminds them of previous endings in their lives. Your counsellor will also help you to look to the future and think about the changes you have made. This could include thinking about how you will deal with any further problems and challenges.

### **Finding out more**

Some websites with helpful information about counselling and psychotherapy include:

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) [www.bacp.co.uk/](http://www.bacp.co.uk/)

British Association for the Person-Centred Approach (BAPCA) [www.bapca.org.uk/](http://www.bapca.org.uk/)

### **References**

Roth AD, Hill A and Pilling S (2009) Humanistic psychological therapies: What skills can service users expect their therapists to have?

[http://www.ucl.ac.uk/clinical-psychology/CORE/Humanistic\\_Competences/service\\_users.pdf](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/clinical-psychology/CORE/Humanistic_Competences/service_users.pdf)