HEALTH HERO | Assist

Information about counselling

Talking about our mental health and getting support when we need it is something that is spoken about more today than ever before. We hear about counselling all the time in the media, but what actually happens in a counselling session? This article is designed to give someone considering counselling an idea of what to expect.

What is counselling?

Counselling can be helpful for a wide range of life experiences and issues, and each person considering counselling will have their own reasons for doing so. For some people it may be to work on ways to cope with issues such as depression, stress, anxiety and low self-esteem. For others, the aim could be to enhance their understanding of themselves or others and improving or influencing change in a relationship. Sometimes we experience challenging life events and find it difficult to talk to friends, family or loved ones, so having someone impartial to explore this with can be very effective.

Many of us have never had the experience of being properly listened to and heard. This alone can be powerfully supportive and affirming.

While clients needn't be in a crisis to benefit from counselling, people often seek counselling because they are experiencing painful emotions such as anger, sadness, guilt, shame or regret to the extent that these feelings are impacting on day to day life, or perhaps feel overwhelming. It can be tough to talk about personal feelings and it is normal to feel vulnerable or even a little scared. Sometimes clients believe they should be able to cope with what they are experiencing, as they compare themselves to others who seem to be able to manage without difficulty. Every person has their own unique life history and while we will all encounter situations we find challenging, the specific challenge for each individual will be as diverse as those individuals themselves. Taking the step to engage in counselling when we encounter a challenging situation is a courageous thing to do.

The focus of counselling will be the issues the client has chosen to share and work on. The counsellor will not impose a predetermined agenda, instead they will respond to what the client has expressed they wish to work on and support the client to maintain a focus on their chosen goals.

Our counsellors are professionally registered and qualified, with a wealth of experience. They have all worked with a wide range of people who are navigating and making improvements to their lives. Our counsellors provide safe, non-judgemental and confidential spaces for our clients to explore their concerns as openly and honestly as they wish.

Confidentiality

We place the highest priority on protecting the confidentiality and privacy of our clients and believe this is essential for building a trusting and effective therapeutic relationship. Everything discussed in counselling is confidential and our counsellors are bound by strict codes of professional ethics.

In the rare event a client discloses that they intend to harm themselves or someone else, the counsellor will explore this with the client and may feel it is necessary to involve another person or organisation, such as the client's GP or other relevant support, in order to ensure their safety. In the event a client in a safety critical role discloses information that has the potential to impact their capacity to carry out their duties, this will be reported to their organisation. Unless it is an emergency situation, the counsellor will discuss their concerns with the client before involving anyone else. The client will be made aware of any information that would be passed on.

In the highly unusual situation where a client discloses information regarding terrorist acts, drug trafficking, abuse of a child/vulnerable adult or being involved in a hit and run motoring offence, counsellors are required by law to disclose information to a relevant third party. In this extreme situation, the counsellor may be legally bound to not inform the client in order to protect public safety.

Your counselling

We recognise that every person seeking support from a counsellor is unique and there is no 'one size fits all'. We therefore offer a range of support options from our counselling team.

The first step is to call our Support Line, where you can to talk to a counsellor – it may be that a counsellor is immediately available, or we will arrange to call you back at a time that is convenient to you. During the conversation, the counsellor will listen carefully and explore the course of action that may be most useful to the client at that point. The counsellor may provide the client with helpful information, direct them towards additional resources or discuss strategies or techniques to help them cope with current challenges. The client may feel it is helpful to arrange a follow up call with the counsellor a few days later to review how things have gone and consider how to move further forward.

After the initial counselling conversation, the client and counsellor may agree that a series of sessions with a dedicated counsellor would be helpful. We refer to this as Structured Counselling. Our Structured Counselling programme is delivered using the Solution Focused Brief Therapy approach. This is an effective and evidence-based short-term counselling programme, with a specific number of sessions, usually arranged on a weekly basis. The approach is solution-focused, collaborative and goal-directed. This means the client is supported to focus on the aspects of change they want to achieve along with identifying realistic options to achieve their goals.

The counsellor will help the client to identify and use their existing skills, coping strategies and ideas - focusing on strengths rather than the problem itself. The approach is concerned with supporting a client to find more effective responses to the issues they bring to counselling.

Where it is not possible to completely resolve an issue, for example, personal loss or significant change outside the client's control, counselling can really help to process our feelings and help us consider ways of coping with and planning for the future.

As Solution Focused Brief Therapy is a goal-directed approach, it is important the client has considered what they wish to focus on, and a meaningful way to assess how things have improved. When calling the Support Line, the counsellor will help the client to consider what would be a realistic and workable goal and agree this before arranging a referral to Structured Counselling.

During a Structured Counselling session, the counsellor will work with the client to understand what has brought them to counselling and may ask questions such as:

"What are your best hopes from coming to these sessions?"

"How will you know that counselling has been helpful?"

These types of questions are intended to help the client begin to imagine how their current situation might be different, making it possible to consider what steps they might take to move towards the outcome they hope for. The counsellor will work to understand the client's experience from their point of view, listening carefully and checking their understanding as they go. The counsellor may offer information, if it is relevant and the client agrees it would be helpful, but they will not give their opinions or advice, or try to persuade the client towards any specific point of view. The counsellor will respect the client is the expert on their own life and experience, and work alongside them to support in their journey.

Solution Focused Brief Therapy is mainly concerned with the present and the future, although there may be times when difficult memories or experiences from the past are shared by the client during a session. This is perfectly natural. The counsellor will help the client begin to explore the role that these memories and experiences currently play in their life.

The 50 minutes per week the counsellor and client spend together is an important part of the counselling process, however much of the real work takes place between the counselling sessions. This is when the client has the time to reflect, process their thoughts and try out the ideas or strategies they have identified, before returning for their next session.

While Solution Focused Brief Therapy is a very flexible and effective approach for many people and situations, as mentioned above,'one size does not fit all'. Sometimes Structured Counselling is not the best approach, especially where issues are more complex or a long history of trauma has been experienced.

In these situations, there may be insufficient time to work effectively or safely within the bounds of Brief Therapy. If this is the case, the counsellor will discuss this in the initial call with the client and will help them to consider other services. These other services might be outside of HealthHero, such as a GP, private therapy or a specialist mental health service.

Whatever your personal goals or challenges, we encourage you to contact the clinical services team to see how we may be able to support you directly, as well as help you identify further resources that may also be of help for the longer term.