

## What to Expect When You Start Counseling

If you are considering engaging in counseling, (also known as therapy), you may be wondering what to expect. It is common to have conflicting feelings about beginning counseling. Many of us have biases or misconceptions about therapy that can come from various influences, such as the opinions of our family and friends, the culture in which we were raised, and even internet articles and social media posts we read. In this article we aim to demystify the counseling process and address common questions about the therapy experience, such as what to expect in your first session or what to expect in your counselor/client relationship.

### What is counseling?

Counseling (whether conducted in-person or remotely via telehealth) offers a safe, non-judgmental, therapeutic environment to work on your presenting concerns, process difficult emotions and experiences, and receive evidenced based support from a licensed mental health professional. Individuals seek counseling for various concerns, including: depression, anxiety, stress and burnout, grief and loss, relationship concerns, life cycle events, substance abuse, trauma, and more. Counseling sessions often run anywhere from 30-60 minutes and can be scheduled based on your needs and availability (e.g. weekly, twice a week, every other week).

### What to expect in my first session (initial assessment)?

In your initial session, you and your therapist will get to know each other. Your therapist will ask you questions about what prompted you to seek out therapy and what you hope to accomplish in treatment. You will likely be asked about your presenting concerns and symptoms, any past mental health history or treatment, about your current coping skills and support system. In this first session, rapport will begin to be established, but the primary focus is gathering information that will allow you and your counselor to collaboratively determine an initial care plan and treatment goals.

Over the following counseling sessions, you will work collaboratively with your therapist to make progress towards your treatment goals. In these sessions you will have the opportunity for the following:

- Share openly in a safe space without judgement;
- Receive support and empathy for what you are going through and feeling;
- Gain insight into your experiences;
- Better understand your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors
- Identify and practice new coping skills.

As you attend sessions, the therapeutic bond will continue to develop over time.

## What will my counselor be like?

Every counselor is different, as they are people too. Counselors also come from diverse training backgrounds and therapeutic modalities. You can ask counselors about their therapeutic approach and what treatment modalities/interventions they use when considering the best match for you.

With that said, all licensed mental health providers are trained in evidenced based interventions to support you in reaching your therapy goals. Counselors are compassionate and empathetic experts who will partner with you to identify your treatment goals and help you reach them. Many report having a “calling” to the helping profession and are dedicated to helping you live a more full and meaningful life.

A therapist/counselor's role is to offer you insights into your experiences, strategies on how to handle life stressors, and to utilize their clinical expertise and evidence-based treatment interventions to reduce your mental health symptoms.

## What is the difference between EAP counseling and counseling through my health plan or self pay?

At its core, there is no fundamental difference between EAP counseling and counseling you attend privately or with a counselor who accepts your health insurance. All of these counseling types are confidential, HIPAA compliant, and offer evidenced based interventions and a safe space to work on your presenting concerns with a clinical expert.

EAP stands for “Employee Assistance Program” and refers to counseling and other well-being benefits that are covered by your employer and are no cost to you or your covered household members.

Because of the limited sessions typically offered my most EAP programs, EAP counseling is typically focused on short-term, solutions focused interventions and goals. Short-term EAP counseling can be effective in providing support and meaningful outcomes, and it can be a helpful first step toward getting linked to longer term counseling services.

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