

Things To Consider When Choosing A Counselor

The following information is meant to be a guide to help you make an informed decision on a counseling resource for either yourself or someone you know.

Making The Decision To Seek Help

When you as a Christian realize that you or someone you love is in need of counseling there are several issues that need to be addressed.

First is the stigma that seeking professional help may bring. Some may view professional help in a negative light. One has to see these counselors as a gift from God to bring His healing presence in your life.

Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.

—1 Peter 5:7 (NKJV)

He is our strength and place of refuge whenever we need Him.

—Psalm 46:1-3

Second is the task of finding a competent counseling professional who will truly integrate their faith into the counseling process. Unfortunately, not everyone who claims to be a "Christian counselor" operates with a personal and professional commitment to Christ-centered soul care. In order for a Christian to make a good decision about a Christian counseling professional, there are some important factors that need to be understood as well as the various options that are available to you.

Initial Questions To Ask:

When choosing the most appropriate counselor for you, a family member or friend there are a number factors that need to be addressed:

- > The individual's needs -- How severe is the problem? Is it life threatening? Is the individual motivated to get help?
- > The individual's resources -- The person's finances, medical insurance, time, their family and other support systems all need to be considered.
- > The resources available – What types of counseling are available and are there counselors that specialize in the area you feel you need the most help? Does the church offer support groups as well as a lay care ministry, such as Stephen Ministry that can help with some of the person's more immediate emotional and spiritual needs? In most cases these are free services that the church offers to their congregation and people in the community. This is providing a much-needed service for many that cannot afford professional counseling. However, many churches are being careful to train these lay counselors to know when they must refer to a counseling professional.

Questions To Use When Choosing A Counselor

One of the first things we recommend is prayer. Ask God for wisdom to make the right decisions as you seek a counselor. God promises to give you wisdom if you ask for it in faith. Trust God to direct your steps to the right counselor

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting.

—James 1:5-6a

Next, you should consider three basic categories: the spiritual, the professional, and the practical. By understanding the importance of each category and going through the questions that follow you are well on your way to finding someone best able to meet your specific needs

1) *Spiritual Considerations*

Counseling is inherently value laden. Your core values and those of your counselor need to match. Consider the following questions to ask a counselor:

Q. Are you a Christian?

Most healthcare professionals, Christian or not, are in the profession because they want to be of service to others. This question is not meant to imply that non-Christian professionals have an “agenda” to harm Christian clients. Nevertheless, Christian counseling and secular counseling are literally worlds apart.

Q. If yes, how does being a Christian impact your counseling? Do you pray with clients? Do you reference Scripture?

Christian counselors often have personal testimonies that reveal their life experiences. These stories may be shared to build empathy or to simply assure you of their faith experience.

Many Christian counselors pray with clients and reference Scripture within the session. Professional counselors respect the client’s values, opinions, and requests. You should be aware that you have the right to refuse any type of therapeutic intervention offered.

2) *Professional Considerations*

The credentials of mental health professionals and their ethical codes can be confusing to those new to therapy. There are three basic levels of assistance:

Counselor. These individuals most often have master degrees in various disciplines, including psychology, counseling and social work. Some of the credentials include L.P.C. (state licensed professional counselor), N.C.C. (national certified counselor), and L.C.S.W. (state licensed clinical social worker). These counselors provide counseling, and many are trained to provide psychological testing. A few additional types of counselors and credentials include:

Licensed Social Workers (LSW, CSW, LCSW) -- These individuals have earned a master's degree in social work (MSW) or behavioral science. They are preferred by many in state institutions and agencies. They are required to take a state exam, have a certain amount of clinical experience and supervision.

Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC) -- These individuals generally have earned minimally a master's degree (MA, MS, M.Ed). They have completed 2000 hours of supervised counseling experience and have passed a state exam. Most insurance companies accept LPC but some prefer the LCSW over them.

Marriage and Family Counselors (LMFT) -- These professionals usually hold a minimum of a master's degree and specialize in assisting families and individuals overcome relational problems. This license usually requires two years of supervised experience after earning one's degree.

Licensed Clinical Psychologists (LCP) -- These individuals have a doctoral level of education (Ph.D, Psy.D, or Ed.D) and specialize in diagnosis, research, and applied counseling. They have the most versatility and may be private practitioners, school psychologists, institutional or hospital psychologists.

Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselors (LCDC, CADAC) -- These counselors have a bachelor's or master's degree in chemical dependency. Most of these counselors use 12-Step programming. Chemical Dependency counselors may be in private practice but may also work for private hospitals, state or municipal programs, or outpatient clinics.

Psychologist. These individuals may have one of several credentials, including, Ph.D. (doctorate of philosophy), Psy.D. (doctorate of psychology) or Ed.D. (doctorate of education). In most cases these mental health professionals provide counseling and psychological testing. Most states do not permit psychologists to prescribe medications.

Psychiatrist. These individuals have M.D. after their name, and are medical doctors or physicians. In addition to psychotherapy, they are trained and licensed to prescribe medicine. In most states, psychiatrists are the only mental health professional who may prescribe medicine.

Specific questions that will help you navigate who you are speaking with and their areas of specialty are:

Q. What are your degrees and major fields of study?

The descriptions provided above will increase your understanding.

Q. Are you licensed or certified? If yes, by whom?

In most cases, a state license is necessary for the independent practice of a mental health professional. Certification may not be a requirement, but often demonstrates that a professional has made continuing education a priority.

Q. Are you trained or specialized in any particular areas?

Specialization may not be an advantage if you don't need highly specialized treatment, which may cost up to 40 percent more than a general counselor. Consider your needs, and, if necessary, ask your counselor if your issues require a specialist.

Q. How many clients have you treated with my type of issues?

Counselors should be able to give prospective clients a good idea of how familiar they are with particular issues. Ethical counselors are well aware of their limitations, and should offer referrals to other counselors in the event they lack the experience required by the client.

Q. How do you define successful treatment?

Successful treatment may be difficult to define, and no counselor can guarantee improvement. However, both the counselor and the client can set measurable therapeutic goals. Here are some questions that will help you to evaluate your experience:

- Has my practical faith in Jesus Christ grown to offset personal distress and clinical symptoms?
- Has measurable progress been made in every goal initiated during the therapeutic process?
- Am I symptom free, or has my coping with the symptoms improved?

Q. What theoretical approaches do you follow in therapy?

There are many approaches adopted and adapted by mental health professionals. As a Christian client your primary need is to determine if any of the therapeutic approaches contain strategies or content that would be detrimental to your spirit. You will also want to ensure that the approaches address the total person: body, mind, and spirit. Comprehensive approaches, like the Iceberg, seek to integrate the body, mind, and spirit by addressing behaviors, thoughts, emotions, and one's relationship with Christ.

Q. Have you ever been in therapy?

This question may surprise you, but a counselor who has gone through therapy will actually be better equipped in many cases to address your specific concerns. Believing that we are all wounded in life, would you rather trust your own care to someone who has gone through the healing process or one who hasn't?

3) Practical Considerations

Q. What is your hourly rate, and are your services typically reimbursed by insurance companies?

Hourly rates vary based on academic training, licensure, specialty, experience, and locale. Outpatient services do not typically require pre-certification, but to be on the safe side, you will want to look at your particular policy.

Q. How often should we meet?

Be sure to ask about office hours. You may be able to find a counselor who works on the weekends and evenings. Of course, location will be a variable, also. Given the importance of your concerns and what you hope to accomplish you may have to forfeit some conveniences in order to find the right counselor.

Q. Does this counselor seem like a good fit?

In the first few sessions you should be able to form a basic impression of the counselor.

- Does he or she put you on edge or make you feel comfortable?
- Is the counselor also asking questions to learn more about you?
- Does he or she listen to what you are saying or try to pigeonhole you into an assessment you are not comfortable with?

In Conclusion

This is an important decision for you and being thorough in choosing a counselor you or someone you trust doesn't know is a critical part of the entire process. Set up a phone interview with the counselor before you start the counseling process and feel free to ask some or all of the questions listed above. Above all, don't be afraid to ask for help and may the Lord bless you as you seek His healing in your life.

For questions or further assistance contact the Care Ministry at Stonecreek Church (770-754-7900 x112, care@stonecreekchurch.org), the main office at your local church or The American Association of Christian Counselors (800-526-8673).

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