
Ways to Make the Most of Counseling

You've taken the step to schedule your first appointment with a psychotherapist or a counselor. You are nervous, though, worried you might not know what to do when you get there.

You have all these thoughts running through your head like, "Will they judge me? Will it really help?" You consider cancelling the appointment, but you're in a crisis or trying to prevent a crisis. In the end you decide you are going.

Once you find a counselor who is a good match, you will want to get the most out of your investment of time and money. Here are some ideas on how to make the most of the counseling experience.

Tip #1: Be Honest

You have nothing to lose by being honest. The counselor works under strict client-therapist confidentiality laws to keep everything you discuss private (unless you are a danger to yourself or others). Tell them about yourself and be as open as you can about your thoughts, emotions and behavior. Most therapists aren't in this business to judge you, but to lend a hand by guiding and coaching you to greater clarity and mastery of your goals.

Tip #2: Identify Counseling Goals

Take time to figure out what goals you'd like to work on in counseling. While counselors' specialties vary, your goals can include the following areas: emotional, relational, behavioral, health, career or work. Identifying your goals will help you focus what you most want to talk about in your sessions. It will also help you talk about progress toward your goals.

Tip #3: Keep a Counseling Journal

Often counselors ask questions you might not have the answer to. You want to reflect on it later, though. Decide if you want to use a password-protected file on your phone or a paper journal to record your counseling goals, reflections, attempts and progress. It's as important to focus on problems as it is to progress. Keeping a personal record of your emotional and relational goals and reflections will help increase your focus, motivation, and self-awareness.

Tip #4: Prepare for Sessions

Get your journal or notebook out before your session and reflect on what you've been working on, thinking about or stuck on. Write down any questions you have or any topics you want to focus on in the next session. That way you can start the session focused on what's most important to you. Thinking space can be challenging to carve out these days with the demands of everyday life, but it will help you make the most of counseling.

Tip #5: Business First

Take care of payment, scheduling and insurance questions at the start of the session. Nothing's more awkward than ending a session with a big revelation or emotional breakthrough followed by three minutes of check writing and calendar navigation. Get all those logistical issues out of the way at the beginning.

Tip #6: Make it Part of Your Life

Therapy works best when you take what you've learned and apply it to the rest of your week. Take the show on the road! This can take the form of specific assignments you want to take on, such as going to the admissions counselor at a community college to find out what you need to do to start a degree. Or it can take the form of more general intentions about how you want to behave going forward, such as an intention to not avoid situations that make you anxious. Also, meditation, exercise, support groups, community, and creative work can all help you to actualize the change you've been discussing in your sessions.

Tip #7: Speak Up Before Ending Counseling

Speak up if you are thinking about ending counseling, whether it's due to making the progress you wanted, financial challenges or personality clashes. Let the counselor know you are done for now so you can have time to summarize and celebrate all your hard work. If the counseling isn't going well and you feel stuck, speak up about this, too. Even if something in therapy confused or hurt you, it's good to practice being open about it. If the counselor isn't a good match, this gives him or her an opportunity to offer other options.

Tip #8: A Therapist Will Not "Fix" You or Tell You What to Do

In a crisis we often want relief as soon as possible and feel like we've run out of options. When a person feels really uncomfortable, they might put pressure on a professional to "fix" them. Pressuring the therapist to fix you will leave you feeling more hopeless and frustrated. And getting the wrong kind of advice can rob you of the opportunity to find your own solutions and develop more confidence when faced with challenges. Instead of pressuring the therapist, own your problem and your progress. Collaborate with the helping professional rather than expecting him or her to solve everything.

Tip #9: Keep Counseling at Least Somewhat Private

Establish boundaries around your therapy sessions. Wait to share what you are working on in counseling until you are starting to make progress. Resist the urge to use the therapist's expert opinion to speak up to loved ones. Instead work on defining yourself to your loved ones, not leaning on your therapist to speak for you. It's very different to say what you are going to do vs. what your therapist thinks you should do. Letting "the expert" prop you up blocks confidence, empowerment and intimacy from growing.

Tip #10: Try Mental Health Prevention

Lastly, you don't have to wait until there is a crisis to come to counseling. While a crisis is motivating and a time where patterns are more easily observed, you can also attend counseling before your relationships or health is at a crisis point. Many people come to counseling to receive coaching on personal or relationship growth goals. Others continue counseling on an as-needed basis to help maintain changes they've made. Counselors don't only offer diagnoses and treatment plans. Counseling is a place to gather clarity, stay motivated and receive both encouragement and a new perspective.