

### Why Go To Counselling ? ... Why not just have coffee with a friend?

For many people, the thought of going to counselling sends shivers down their spine. These people equate the need for counselling with being crazy. Unfortunately, for many normal people facing abnormal issues, the social myths surrounding counselling create a major barrier to seeking professional assistance. But it is exactly this part of the community for whom counselling can provide the necessary support and guidance for them to work through their issues.



How many people who discount the value of counselling do not even have a basic understanding of the counselling process? I recently conducted a workshop for men and I told the group that one of the options that would come up during the session was seeking counselling to assist them in coping with the changes happening in their life. I asked them, "How many of you have contemplated seeking counselling?" The answers were, "no", "it's not for me", "men don't need it", "it won't help me", "I'm not mad". I then asked them what they knew about the counselling process. The answers? "Nothing", "not a thing", "nothing" ..... Whilst the hesitation in seeking counselling comes from all parts of the community, it is particularly true of men.

So what normally happens when you're having a chat over just having coffee with a friend or a beer with a mate? In most cases the friend acts (or wants to act) as the problem solver, telling you what is best for you (because they care for you!) or (worse still) telling you that there is no problem and that you should just pull yourself together! In other cases, to show you that your problem is not that big, a well-meaning friend may be tempted to compare your problem with what is happening in their life. "You call that a problem? I'll show you a problem. Let me tell you what happened to me last week!" All of a sudden the issue is about them, not you. Or maybe they will say, "Your problem isn't as big as Julie's. She told me last week that ....." So is there a likelihood that your friend will soon spread your situation around the place?

Let's compare counselling to the process of chatting with a friend. The result of effective counselling is to have the client determine what course of action they feel is best for them to resolve their issues, and to have learnt something about themselves in the process. John Cleese, in his book "Families and How To Survive Them", described his first counselling experience. He said "I went through a very wide range of moods and emotions, some of them quite new and difficult to handle. But apart from these emotional experiences, and also certain discoveries I made about myself — which didn't quite fit my image of myself at that time! — the most startling realisation was that some of my deepest ingrained attitudes were being questioned for the first time".

# Counsellor's Reflections

So what does happen in counselling? From the outset, the counsellor is there for you. After all, in paying the counsellor their fee, you are creating a professional relationship with them. That creates a working alliance that is under-pinned by the most basic provisions in the counselling process: confidentiality, non-judgment, patience and empathy. A lot of the benefit of counselling is derived just from the client talking about their issue and how it is affecting them and those around them. On many occasions the client's insight comes from just hearing themselves verbalise what has been thrashing around in their head – putting their thoughts and emotions into words. Sitting with a professional, the client can be shown recurring patterns of behaviour in their life (“Wow, I’m hearing myself saying that my third wife was kind of the same type of person as the emotional experiences, and also certain discoveries I made about myself — which didn’t quite fit my image of myself at that time! — the most startling realisation was that some of my deepest ingrained attitudes were being questioned for the first time”).

So what does happen in counselling? From the outset, the counsellor is there for you. After all, in paying the counsellor their fee, you are creating a professional relationship with them. That creates a working alliance that is under-pinned by the most basic provisions in the counselling process: confidentiality, non-judgment, patience and empathy. A lot of the benefit of counselling is derived just from the client talking about their issue and how it is affecting them and those around them. On many occasions the client's insight comes from just hearing themselves verbalise what has been thrashing around in their head – putting their thoughts and emotions into words. Sitting with a professional, the client can be shown recurring patterns of behaviour in their life (“Wow, I’m hearing myself saying that my third wife was kind of the same type of person as the university course – Mum always said that I wasn’t very bright”), or come face-to-face with their own negative self-talk (“I can’t dance and I know that if I try, I’ll just make a fool of myself”).

Many of the basic skills in a counsellor's training come from Gerard Egan's book “The Skilled Helper”. He suggests that the two basic goals of helping are to assist clients in managing specific problems that are currently present in their life and the other relates to their general ability to be better able to manage the problems that might lie ahead of them. That is to say, counselling is not just the process of helping the client resolve current issues, but that the counsellor should also be looking to develop unused or underused problem-solving skills already present in the client. He says, “Helping should make a substantive difference in the life of the client. Helping is about constructive change.”

So consider using a professional counsellor to help you work through the situations that are making you sad, angry, or just plain stuck, and keep your friends for the enjoyable times over coffee or a beer.