

Why people who need counselling don't come for counselling (Is this you?)

There's a lot of talk in the student counselling and mental health world about waiting times: how long students have to wait for their first counselling appointment. This podcast is about how long students make *themselves* wait for an appointment. In our experience at the Oxford university student counselling service, students often wait months or years to speak to someone about a problem, even though they know in their heart of hearts that they need some help. Fairly often when I ask a third year student how long they've had the problem we're beginning to think about together, the reply is: since first year. Or even much earlier. And sadly, it isn't the case that the more distressing the problem, the less likely the student is to delay. If anything, it may be the opposite: overwhelming problems are often carried around for prolonged periods, so that by the time students come for counselling they're really struggling: exhausted, ground down, dispirited.

Since you're listening to this podcast, maybe you or someone you care about is in this category: someone with a problem who hasn't—or hasn't yet—sought any help. In the spirit of helping you out of that position and across the threshold into the counselling service, let's identify what might be some of the barriers and see whether we can clear them out of the way.

Barrier one: To seek help, you have to admit to yourself that there's a problem. Many people respond to problems they fear are insoluble by going into denial: problem? what problem? Or by trying to minimise the problem--telling themselves it isn't a big deal, it's a 'first world problem', or telling themselves that 'other people deal with far worse'. Going for help, saying there is a problem, *does* make it real. But it also brings a huge benefit: it opens up the possibility of doing something about it.

Barrier two: Worrying you'll be expected to know what the problem is, and to articulate it clearly to your counsellor. Perhaps without realising, you are thinking of a counselling session as simply a different kind of tutorial. But counselling is something completely different. We don't expect you to know what the problem is. All we expect is that you bring what you *do* know--for example the things you think and feel and notice about yourself--and that you

engage with us actively, so that together we can work out what the problem is, and begin to make sense of your experience.

Barrier three: Expecting to be blamed, criticised or judged for having the problem, or for failing to solve it on your own. Think back to experiences you have had disclosing problems in the past. If you were blamed instead of helped, if you were criticised rather than understood, you may now expect this treatment. More subtly, if you tend to blame or criticise yourself when you have a problem, you may expect the same harsh treatment from others. Think how liberating it could be to experience a different response: attention, interest, compassion, and a preparedness to be right there alongside you, finding a way forward.

Barrier four is one to which the academically-minded are especially prone: feeling that you have ruminated on your problem for years, thought about it from every conceivable angle, read round the internet. Surely, you may think, it's inconceivable that a counsellor would have anything new to contribute. In response to this we would say some kinds of problem are very difficult to see clearly from your own point of view. A different--and psychologically informed-- perspective generally yields much more than people are expecting, and collaborating feels more constructive and more creative than trying to think about a problem alone.

Barrier five: feeling your problem is too big to fit into the number of sessions you expect to be offered, and that you don't want to open a can of worms only to have to try to put the worms back in the can afterward. We understand this concern, but would nonetheless encourage you to be brave enough to bring us the whole problem. You may be surprised how helpful a few sessions can be, and we will think with you about how to continue the process which is set in motion with us--whether that consists of initiatives you can take in your own life, support you can access elsewhere, or therapeutic work you can do on your own, for example using self-help materials. And some students tell us it actually feels good to do a limited amount of work, knowing they can resume therapeutic work in the future whenever it feels right, rather than pushing for a perfect solution right now.

Barrier six is the opposite of barrier five: that if you come for one counselling session, you will be pressured or expected to attend further sessions even if you don't want to.

In reality, it is absolutely fine to come for a single session, and a significant proportion of students using our service do exactly that.

A seventh barrier is worry about making yourself too vulnerable: that you will be expected or directed to submit to some therapeutic process with which you are not comfortable, to talk about things you don't feel safe talking about, to display emotion in a way you aren't comfortable with, or to engage in a therapy you don't believe will be helpful. In reality there are many ways of doing this work and our aim is always to find an approach that is right for you. In fact, our code of ethics requires us always to respect your autonomy and your right to make the choices that feel right for you. Meanwhile, to anyone who imagines counselling is about tea and sympathy, tears and tissues, we would say: counselling is a conversation. A serious conversation. It can be hard work. It entails thinking as well as feeling. It is about discovering and affirming resources as well as exploring and addressing areas of vulnerability.

You may also be reassured to know that counselling is completely confidential. Only in the most exceptional circumstances--where we believe you, or someone else to be imminently at risk--would we disclose any information without your prior consent. Even the fact that you have attended a counselling session is kept strictly confidential.

And finally, a seventh barrier. You may have sought help in the past and found that help UN-helpful. You may have gone to a doctor and emerged with medication you didn't want, or had an experience with a counsellor or therapist you felt was useless, or who had an agenda that wasn't yours. We hope that if and when you come see us you will tell us about these experiences so that we can take steps, together, to ensure that the experience you have with us is a different one.

All of these reasons for hesitating about counselling are understandable. But it would be a great shame for them to get in the way. Our statistics tell a clear story about the power and effectiveness of counselling: at the start of counselling 40% of students rate their level of

difficulty as 'severe or very severe'. At the conclusion of counselling this figure has fallen from 40% to 5%. At the start of counselling, 23% of students indicate that they are thinking of suspending their studies, or even withdrawing. At the conclusion of counselling just 4% are considering suspension or withdrawal. Students who have used the service tell this story even more movingly and persuasively than these dry statistics do. Have a look at the counselling service website to see a 5 minute film of students reflecting on their experience of counselling with us.

Counselling isn't magic, but it does make a difference, and does this consistently and predictably for thousands of students every year. If you need counselling, don't make yourself wait any longer. Send us an email, or pick up the phone.

Thanks for listening.

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