

COUNSELING | EXPECTATIONS

General Expectations

As is the case with most things in which we engage, you typically only get out of it what you put into it. This is especially so with counseling. Pursuing help and consistently “showing up” are integral parts of what it means to “put oneself into it,” but there is more required if one hopes to emerge in a better place than he/she started. If your goals concern, for example, overcoming an immediate challenge (or set of challenges), being able to handle future issues that might arise, and (more generally) to *be and feel* healthier and happier, it’s going to take more than just showing up. Hard work, patience and dedication are also required. In addition, setting reasonable goals at the outset and along the way and maintaining realistic expectations of the counseling experience (in general) are critical to the success of your therapeutic journey. With this in mind please consider the following brief list of things to expect and not expect from your counseling experience.

First, it is reasonable to *expect that you will be provided with a safe, nurturing, open and neutral arena to explore and express your thoughts/feelings/behaviors*. Such a counseling arena or environment might be thought of as “table settings”¹ (metaphorically speaking) – that is, an optimally organized counseling arena should be one that allows you “seating at a neutral table arranged in such a way so as to facilitate your growth.” Implicit here (in terms of your counselor) are the qualities (or settings) of: empathy, objectivity, open-mindedness, honesty, integrity, attention, confidentiality, and focus, among other things. Also implicit here (in terms of the counselee) is that you arrive at the arena/table with similar “counselee table settings.”²

Second, it is reasonable to *expect variance in your thoughts/feelings/behaviors (i.e., highs-and-lows or ups-and-downs)*. That is to say, thoughts/feelings/behaviors – our primary objects of investigation – take time to “get to know” properly. This “getting to know” process can be quite exhausting and typically involves a lot of ups and downs, especially when one considers the complexity of the objects under investigation, their possible interrelatedness, and whatever external/environmental factors that come into play. Thus, it is not unusual to experience (in and out of counsel) a full spectrum of emotions – from discomfort, anger and frustration to relief, happiness, and moments of insight.

Third, it is reasonable to *expect that you will be provided with a set(s) of tools to help you better navigate the challenges you wish to address and the respective goals you want to achieve*. These tools will vary depending on the counseling approach. For example, in terms of philosophical counseling (and LBT, in particular), you can expect to be armed with a means to analyze your thoughts/feelings/behaviors (from a philosophical perspective), correct maladaptive and/or irrational components of your thoughts/feelings/behavior, and maintain/encourage healthy, rational “ways of being” in the world (which will then, ideally, decrease the force of those things that detract from your health and happiness and increase the probability of achieving your goals and reaching a state of health and happiness).

In contrast, it is ***not reasonable to expect that the services you receive will be the “end-all-be-all” or the “answer to all of your concerns.*** Even if counseling provides you with a safe and open environment to explore your thoughts/feelings/behaviors and a set of tools with which to navigate life, there may be additional factors in play that require attention. For example, it may be the case that a client’s experiences are the derivative of a chemical imbalance that might better be addressed via medication. Hence, in such cases, dual-methods of treatment (from one or more professionals) might be beneficial.

In a similar vein, it is ***not reasonable to expect that all counseling approaches are the same, that all practitioners are identical*** (even those from the same academic/professional bent), ***or even that all forms of counseling are appropriate (or will be effective) for your particular needs, challenges and aims.*** For example, you may be indeed be experiencing depression and, further, might experience relief of some sort from a number of counseling approaches; however, it may also be the case that the source of your depression is something that (to more fully address) requires specialized attention (e.g., depression from physical and sexual abuse, PTSD, or grief/bereavement oft benefits from counselors who specialize in those areas).

Remaining aware and open to the above basic sets of expectations will be helpful for you in your unique path toward wellness.

Session Expectations

In addition to the above general expectations, you can also anticipate several things with respect to your counseling sessions. Generally speaking, your first counseling session will include a discussion that addresses, *at minimum*, the following topics:

- Why you are seeking assistance
- Your personal history and current situation
- Your current symptoms (how what you are seeking assistance for/experiencing is presenting itself – e.g., are you having problems sleeping? Are you feeling short-tempered?)
- What you would like to achieve (your immediate and ultimate goals relative to the discussion at hand)

Sessions that follow will typically be crafted together by you and your practitioner and will be structured to meet your specific (and changing) needs. A practitioner’s approach/style will also inevitably play a role in this structuring and restructuring.

Counselor “Table Settings”

With the above in mind and regardless of the practitioner’s particular approach, it’s important in your counseling sessions that you try to come to & maintain the following “table-settings”:

- ***Participate actively*** – therapy is a team effort that requires both parties to be active and engaged.
- ***Be open and honest*** – therapists are trained professional but they’re not mind readers; being open and honest is critical to communication and progress. Listen to your own reactions, feelings and thoughts and do not be afraid to share them with the practitioner.

- **Be prepared** – as much as possible try to prepare yourself for discussion about what you're feeling, what you want to accomplish, why you think you're close or not close, etc.
- **Ask questions** – questions are crucial to understanding anything; do not be afraid to ask about anything you don't understand or, alternatively, want to know more about.
- **Attend/participate regularly** – consistency and regular participation (e.g., engaged conversation, focused attention) is crucial to your success.
- **Discuss your progress** – don't be afraid to talk about your progress with your counselor as you go along and let him/her know if you find something particularly helpful or unhelpful.
- **Complete “homework assignments”**– relevant and progress-oriented tasks (or “homework assignments”) will typically be crafted by you and your counselor together; try and complete these as applicable so that you are prepared and can receive the full benefits of therapy.

¹ These “table settings” need not be fixed or rigid. In contrast, flexibility and adaptability are important.

² See the points above in the subsection of ‘Session Expectations’ titled ‘Counselee “Table Settings.”’