

FINDING A COUNSELOR

How To Find A Counselor

Finding a good counselor to help with your grief sometimes takes a little doing. The best resource is a recommendation from someone you know and trust. If he or she had a good counseling experience, and believe you would work well with this counselor, that may be the best place to start. Even then, however, only you will be able to determine whom you feel comfortable with as a counselor.

If your first attempt at following a friend's suggestion doesn't provide enough information, try more formal methods. The following resources may be helpful:

- A local hospice which may even have a counselor on staff who may be available to work with you.
- A self-help bereavement group which may maintain a list of counselors specializing in bereavement therapy. [The SIDS Foundation of Washington works with Children's Hospital's Journey Bereavement Program to make referrals.]
- Your personal physician, who can refer you to people trained in bereavement care.
- An information and referral service, such as a crisis intervention center which maintains referral lists of trained counselors.
- A funeral home; some funeral homes maintain lists of counselors who focus on bereavement work.
- A hospital, family service agency, and/or mental health clinic usually also maintain referral sources.

In making a decision about a counselor who is best for you, your own judgment is essential. Keep in mind, however, that a counselor may have received training in a mental health field, yet may have little or no training in bereavement counseling. Get to know the counselor; you will discover then if she or he has the counseling experience you will find helpful.

Determining If This Counselor Is The One For You

To determine if you will work well with a counselor, I have included below a list of 15 questions. While this is not a scientific inventory, my hope is that you will find it helpful. Responses are scored from 0 to 4: 0=never; 1=slightly or occasionally; 2=sometimes or moderately; 3=a great deal or most of the time; and 4=markedly or all of the time. Check the number that most applies after each question.

1. The counselor provides you with a feeling of being understood.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

Empathetic understanding serves as the basis for the work you will do in a counseling relationship. Ask yourself if the counselor has a desire to understand you? Does he or she listen and hear what you think and feel? Without empathy, you will not feel understood, and, if you do not feel understood, you will probably not trust this person to help you heal. Be aware, though, that understanding is not the same as total agreement. Sometimes, a counselor may understand but disagree.

2. You have a clear understanding of how the counseling experience will help you in terms of your grief and mourning.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

A good counselor can help you understand what the counseling process can do to help you heal. Do not hesitate to ask the counselor how he or she thinks counseling will benefit you. Express your own hopes related to this experience and see if the counselor agrees that those expectations are realistic. Keep in mind that several sessions may be needed to develop some mutually agreeable counseling goals.

3. The counselor appears genuinely interested and attends to what you are saying.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

In other words, do you feel connected to the counselor? Is he or she alert, sensitive, and caring? On the other hand, the counselor appears tired, distracted, or overworked? You deserve and need full attention. If you aren't getting focused, genuine attention, look elsewhere for help.

4. Does what the counselor say about your grief and mourning make sense to you?

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

This question relates to trusting your instincts. Sad to say, some people are victims of misinformed counselors who lack training in bereavement counseling. If the counselor makes comments that reflect judgment instead of understanding, you may want to consider another counseling resource. Comments like, "You shouldn't feel that way," or "Have you thought about what you have to be thankful for?" or "You just have to accept it, and get on with life" reflect a judging attitude by the counselor.

5. The counselor encourages you to "teach" him or her about your experience.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

You are the expert about your experience surrounding the death of someone in your life. For the counselor to understand your unique grief journey, he or she must be willing to have you be the teacher about this experience. If the counselor is talking more than you are, odds are that he or she is not allowing you to teach about your individual needs.

6. The counselor helps you explore areas you might want to avoid.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

A helpful counselor will encourage you to talk, think about and feel certain issues--sometimes uncomfortable issues--that you may want to avoid. Effective counselors often use a skill called "supportive confrontation" to help you participate in the hard work of mourning.

7. The counselor appears to be flexible and open to ideas other than those ideas which reflect only his or her own perspective.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

Openness to different thoughts and ideas is the mark of a good professional. If the counselor appears as an "all-knowing expert" who espouses the only "true answers," you would probably be better helped by someone more flexible and open to your ideas to what is helpful for you.

8. The counselor is willing to explore other sources of support to help you with your grief and mourning.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

While support groups aren't for everyone, many bereaved people find them to be of tremendous help. Your counselor should be willing to help you find additional healing resources. You might ask if he or she is aware of any group experiences or books that have been helpful to other clients.

9. The counseling session is valuable; small talk does not describe your experience.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

While most counseling sessions are characterized by some "warm-up" and social exchanges, counseling is

different than small talk. If you talk about everything but your grief and mourning, something is wrong. Either you, the counselor, or both of you may be afraid of encountering the feelings of hurt and loss. A helpful counselor will bridge from warm-up time to focused ways of helping you work to heal. If you feel like you have a pleasant social experience with your counselor, but don't make progress in your grief work, discuss these feelings with your counselor.

10. The counselor is open and willing to reveal parts of his or her own experience with death that might be helpful to you.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

The counselor who is distant, never expresses emotions or never talks about his or her own life experiences does exist; they are however, just not for you. Effective counseling requires a meaningful interchange. The counselor should openly respond to your questions about his or her own experiences with death. While the primary focus should remain your grief work, it is certainly appropriate to ask if your counselor has experienced the death of someone loved in his or her own life. This statement doesn't mean that a counselor must have a multitude of death experiences to be helpful to you. He or she, however, should be willing to respond to your questions.

11. The counselor is interested in talking to other significant people in your life--family, relatives, friends--when it seems that it would be helpful to the counseling process.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

An effective counselor will be interested in how you interact with the people around you. If you, your counselor, or both of you decide to exclude these significant influences, counseling may not be as helpful as it could be.

12. The counselor appears to practice what he or she preaches.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

The helpful counselor is one who will allow himself or herself to mourn when a death occurs. The message about mourning and practicing good self-care are the same things he or she has also done when doing the work of mourning. Ask your counselor specifically what he or she has found personally helpful.

13. The counselor understands that the concepts of "reconciliation," "accommodation" or "integration" are more helpful than "resolution" or "recovery."

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

This statement relates to the counselor's awareness that you are forever changed by the experience of the death of someone loved. If the counselor's goal is to "get you over" or "resolve" your grief, he or she will probably not be helpful. Your mutual goals should be to ultimately learn to live with your grief while you discover continued meaning in life.

14. The counselor interacts with you as an equal and relates to you in a helpful, positive way.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

One way to determine that the counselor respects you and considers you an equal is whether or not you feel comfortable with him or her. If your counselor has an air of superiority and formality, you will probably be better served to find someone else.

15. Your counselor gives you a sense of hope for your healing, while recognizing you are forever changed by this death of someone loved.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__

Hope for healing is essential to your ultimate "reconciliation" to the death. No, you won't ever "get over it." Your counselor, however, should be able to help you experience a sense of progress in your work of mourning. While he or she may help you embrace your hurt, you must also have a sense of hope for movement toward your healing.

Understanding Your Score

Again, I remind you that this inventory is not a scientific instrument. Used with caution, however, it can provide you with a sense of whether you are working with a counselor who will be helpful.

Take a moment to total your scores. A score totaling 60 would probably be very unlikely. A score above 45, however, may suggest that the counselor would be a good choice. A score of between 30 to 40 may alert you to the possibility that you should find a more compatible counselor; a score below 30 signals that you need to look for another counselor.

In reality, you probably need to meet with a counselor a few times before using this inventory. Sometimes the initial individual-counselor compatibility will be easier to assess, and you will be able to make a much quicker decision as to whether the counselor meets your needs.

Cost and Length of Counseling

The cost of counseling is an important consideration. You will probably discover that costs vary in different regions of the country and from counselor to counselor. The costs generally range between \$50 to \$100 per session; a session lasts approximately one hour.

Most counselors have a standard fee; however, some individuals will charge less, depending on your ability to pay the full fee. Some counselors also operate on a sliding scale fee structure based upon your income. Do not hesitate to openly discuss the counselor's fee structure.

Think of the counseling experience as an investment in yourself. While you may have difficulty justifying the expense, what could be more important than your physical, emotional and spiritual well-being? No, you can't drive, eat, or wear the results of counseling. To rediscover continued meaning in your life should be considered one of the best investments you ever made.

Just as fee schedules vary, so do recommendations on the frequency and length of necessary counseling time. This difference usually depends on your unique experience. Some bereaved people only need a few sessions, while others benefit from a longer-term counseling relationship. Discuss this issue openly with your counselor and decide what is best for you.

I often find it helpful to suggest a "time contract" with people I counsel. After an initial consultation, we agree on a certain number of sessions together. Again, the specific number of sessions depends on the individual's unique circumstances. At the conclusion of a pre-established number of sessions, we discuss where the person I am counseling is in his or her grief journey. If the idea of time limited sessions appeals to you, bring it up to your counselor for discussion.

Regardless of the length of your counseling, doubtfully your sense of progress will occur in an easy, steadily forward direction. The ebb and flow of the healing journey means you may at times feel a lack of constant progress. Be patient with yourself as you continue to remember the person who died, while working to embrace meaning in your continued living. If you feel like sometimes you take two steps backward, then one forward, remember it is a normal part of the healing experience.

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