

Do I need a Counsellor or a Psychologist?

I'm often asked the question "What's the difference between a counsellor and a psychologist?" usually followed by "And what about psychiatrists? Where do they fit in?"

There seems to be a great deal of confusion in the public domain of who to approach if you need mental health assistance. This is made more confusing by the considerable overlap between the work that counsellors and psychologists do. Hopefully after reading this article on the similarities and differences between them you'll have a clearer idea of who to approach if the need arises.

Let's firstly look at the similarities;

1. Both are accredited health professionals

Accredited Counsellors recognised by The Australian Counselling Association will have a minimum of a degree in counselling or an equivalent qualification.

Accredited Psychologists (those recognised by the Australian Psychological Society or the Australian Health Practitioners Regulatory Agency) have studied psychology for a minimum of 4 years but usually for 6 years.

Each of these professional bodies demand that members are suitably qualified, that they have professional insurance, and that they undertake a set amount of supervision and professional development each year.

2. Both engage in non-invasive health practices (ie talking rather than drugs)

Neither Counsellors nor Psychologists are permitted by law to prescribe medication, whereas Psychiatrists are qualified Medical Practitioners who have gone on to specialise in mental health, and are able to prescribe medication for mental health issues. Your GP can also prescribe medication for mental health issues.

3. Both are relevant and deserving of consideration

As an individual or couple you may engage with either a Counsellor or a Psychologist, and there is often considerable overlap in the services offered. Often it comes down to the severity of your issues, and very importantly the degree of connection you feel with your health practitioner and how comfortable you feel working with them.

When you are experiencing difficulties ANY action to recovery is better than not seeking help at all. Don't panic if you get it wrong, an intrinsic responsibility of all Counsellors and Psychologists is to recognise when another approach would be better suited to you, or if an issue is outside their area of expertise, and to make an appropriate recommendation.

Now for the differences;

1. Life Solutions vs Specific Mental Health Conditions

Counsellors generally work with what we call the 'worried well'; those who have specific issues in their lives that are causing them distress. These may be relationship problems, work problems, stress, anxiety, mild to moderate depression, anger management, adjusting to change, or grief or loss. Clients are often stuck with an issue, or are struggling with the intensity of their feelings. No referral from your GP is necessary; therefore sessions are not recorded on your medical records.

Psychologists are trained to work on specific mental health conditions that are making life really difficult, for example; chronic anxiety, panic disorders, severe depression, addictions, OCD, Bi-Polar, Schizophrenia, or Personality Disorders. Some are trained in general counselling as well. To see a psychologist you will generally have completed a Mental Health Plan with your GP or be under the care of a Psychiatrist as well. If you needed a court report you would see a Psychologist for an assessment.

Both Counsellors and Psychologists can specialise in couples or family counselling.

2. Financial Considerations

Psychology in general demands a higher fee for services than Counselling. As a rule Psychologists charge from \$120 - \$235 per hour, while Counsellors will charge from \$80 - \$130 per hour.

Local couples counselling varies from \$100 to \$160 per hour.

If you are suffering from a specific mental health condition and have completed a Mental Health Plan with your doctor you may be entitled to up to 10 Medicare rebated sessions per calendar year with a Psychologist. Currently the Medicare Rebate is valued at between \$60.10 and \$84.84 for most conditions, and up to \$145.65* for more severe conditions. The difference in fees should not be interpreted as a difference in the quality of service. As discussed earlier, Counsellors and Psychologists perform different functions.

In summary

To undertake therapy is a powerful individual statement and hopefully a decision that rewards for a lifetime. I would recommend that front of mind is to find a therapist that you feel safe enough with to talk openly about your issues, someone who "gets" you, is interested in what you want to achieve, and has the skills and insight to guide you there. Sometimes you may have to kiss a few frogs to find your ideal therapist.

Personal distress and mental illness can be terribly debilitating. If left untreated, it can lead to destructive behaviours and the breakdown of our most valued possessions; our happiness and relationships. As a passionate health professional, I implore all those feeling distressed to reach out and seek help whichever path you choose.

*As at 1 November 2013