

Everything You Wanted to Know About Counselling ...But Were Afraid to Ask

What is counselling?

Counselling involves the development of a therapeutic relationship between a client and a mental health professional that focuses on the client's concerns and problems. This involves a collaborative effort as the two parties work together to identify and work towards the client's goals. Through this process, clients can develop a better understanding of themselves, including their patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, and the ways in which these may have been problematic in their lives. Counselling provides the opportunity to change some of these unhelpful patterns and to examine how to tap into the client's existing resources - or to develop new ones - to allow for better, more satisfying emotional and social functioning.

Who can benefit from counselling?

Individuals seeking counselling usually face normal developmental and life concerns. Problems with **managing stress, depression, anxiety, relationship/family problems, grief and loss, identity concerns, poor self-esteem, and loneliness** are some of the reasons for which people choose to engage in the counselling process. University students seek counselling for the above reasons along with more population-specific concerns such as **homesickness, adjustment to university, career indecision, test anxiety, academic pressures, and difficulties balancing school/work/home life.**

How do I know if I should seek counselling?

It may be appropriate to seek counselling if you are experiencing any emotional, social, or behavioural problem - please see the following examples:

- Personal problems that interfere with your academic performance, sleep, ability to concentrate, and/or relationships with others.
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness.
- Prolonged sadness or grieving.
- Feeling depressed, lethargic, or apathetic.
- Thoughts of suicide or wanting to harm yourself or other people.
- Persistent worry or panic attacks.
- Increased irritability or extreme mood swings.
- Bizarre, dangerous, violent, or disruptive behavior (e.g., hostility, aggressive acts).
- A pattern of conflict or unhappiness in your personal relationships.
- Uncertainty about your choice of university program or future career.
- Concern about the behaviour or psychological state of a friend, partner, peer, or family member, and wondering about how or even whether you should intervene.

Who will know that I am coming for counselling?

Unless you decide to inform others that you are seeking counselling, no one will know. For example, if a relative or professor contacts our office for information about you, including whether or not you have made or kept an appointment, we cannot and will not disclose this information. (Of course, you may run into someone you know in the waiting room, but the chances of this are very small.)

Mental health professionals adhere to a strict policy of maintaining confidentiality regarding clients' /patients' involvement in counselling. In the event that you do want your information to be shared with someone external to University Wellness Services, your written consent must be provided. Keep in mind that there are exceptions to this rule; there are circumstances in which professionals are ethically and legally entitled to break confidentiality. These circumstances are as follows:

- Serious risk of suicide or harm to you or others.
- Ongoing abuse or neglect of a child or dependent adult.
- Subpoena of your file or required testimony by a court of law.

How can I best benefit from counselling?

We recommend the following strategies to optimize your counselling process:

- Attend all scheduled sessions and arrive on time.
- Be specific about the concerns that have led you to seek help.
- Along with your counsellor, establish goals for your work together.
- Give thought to what you would like to discuss during each session.
- Be willing to try new behaviours within and outside of your sessions.
- Complete “homework” tasks, if these are assigned by your counsellor.
- Communicate with your counsellor if the process is not helpful to you.

What are the differences between a counsellor, a psychologist, and a psychiatrist?

The term “counsellor” is unregulated in Alberta and so anyone who provides counselling, regardless of training, can use this title. Mental health treatment providers can be psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, psychiatric nurses, or have other professional designations, so ask your provider about his/her credentials!

Psychologists, according to the occupational profile on the Alberta Learning Information Service website (www.alis.gov.ab.ca/occinfo), are “concerned with the study and management of human behaviour.” They usually specialize in one area, e.g., counselling/clinical practice, school psychology, or forensic work. In Alberta, psychologists require a minimum of a Master’s degree, and some also have a doctoral degree. Only individuals registered with the College of Alberta Psychologists (CAP) may use the title “psychologist.”

Psychiatrists, on the other hand, are physicians (medical doctors) who specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness and emotional disorders. While they may provide counselling just like psychologists, their treatment approaches are usually more biologically based; for instance, they may prescribe medication.

What if I need medication?

Individuals who suffer from certain conditions (e.g., severe anxiety, depression) may benefit from taking medication - either on its own or in conjunction with counselling. If you are wondering whether you might need medication, please discuss this issue with your counsellor, and a referral to a physician or a psychiatrist may be made.

A referral to a physician for a medical “check-up” may also be made in order to ensure that your symptoms are not caused by a physical disorder. Several physical conditions (e.g., hypothyroidism or anemia) can produce changes in mood, energy level, concentration, etc., and require medical treatment rather than counselling.

What is Counselling & Clinical Services? How do I access the services?

At the University of Alberta, Counselling & Clinical Services (CCS) is the only agency on campus that offers free professional counselling services to students. It is staffed by professionals from various disciplines (psychiatry, psychology, and nursing) as well as students completing training in psychology. All trainees at CCS are supervised by senior-level staff.

To access services at CCS, a student must first attend an initial consultation; please call **780-492-5205** during office hours or check www.mentalhealth.ualberta.ca for the current initial consultation schedule.

Please note that only current U of A students are eligible for our services. Faculty and staff have access to counselling services through the Employee Assistance Program.