

How to get the most out of your
Counseling

Eliza Huie and Kyle Johnston

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Introduction

We are not meant to face life on our own. Friends, family, pastors, and our faith community are God-given resources of care and support that may help us as we walk through life. But even with these resources, there are times when we find ourselves wrestling with the question of whether or not we should seek formal counseling.

If you are reading this you are likely wondering just that. You might be asking yourself if your situation is serious enough to merit talking with a counselor. Maybe you are uncertain about what counseling will actually entail. Or perhaps you are wondering if now is a good time for you to pursue counseling. Will it even help? And if so, how do you find a counselor?

An experienced biblical counselor can be an extension of your community of care. Our struggles can become complicated and overwhelming. Relationships or situations can slowly deteriorate despite our efforts towards change. If this describes your circumstances, enlisting additional help is a good and wise step to take. Sometimes a new set of eyes and ears can bring beneficial insight.

But don't wait for a crisis. One of the best times to seek counseling is when you simply feel you may benefit from a fresh perspective. Scripture tells us that there is wisdom in a multitude of counselors. When possible, pursue counseling before you reach the crisis point. Allowing another to bring a new perspective shows maturity and wisdom.

In the pages ahead, we will explore what to consider before, during, and after the counseling process. It is our expectation that in considering these insights, you will not only be able to determine if counseling would be a helpful option, but also how to get the most out of the counseling process.

CHAPTER 1

Should I Seek Counseling?

If you are considering counseling, ask yourself a few questions first. These questions are not diagnostic but simply intended to allow an honest assessment of how well you are managing the circumstances of life. Your answers may help you assess if counseling is a good option for you.



Are you feeling stuck?

Does it seem like your best efforts to change are ineffective? Do you feel trapped in a never-ending negative cycle of poor communication and hurtful interaction in your relationships? Perhaps you feel like you are running through life on a treadmill that is going too fast but you can't stop. Sometimes suffering can be unrelenting and discouragement over unchanging circumstances can feel overwhelming. Or maybe your own choices of unhealthy patterns of living or sinful, destructive habits have you feeling pinned down.

You may feel stuck as a result of these situations. And the discouragement that comes with it can leave you without direction, even immobilized. In times like these, counsel from others can be a powerful support to reorient you and provide traction to gain momentum toward change.

Have you suffered a distressing or traumatising event?

Tragedies can be unexpected, like the death of a friend or family member, miscarriage, accidents, injuries, illness, unforeseen financial loss, terrifying natural disasters, or victimisations and violations. All are incredibly hard to endure and these unforeseen losses or changes can unsteady the heart. But even when difficult things are somewhat expected, it can lead you to places that are unfamiliar and challenging. A counselor can help you work through both unexpected and expected hardships.

Biblical counselors, trained in walking with people who have experienced suffering, can hold out a hope-filled perspective in the hardest of circumstances. Our God is the "Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3). If you or someone close to you has endured any of these distressing situations, He wants to comfort you. Counseling is one way He does this. We see this in the earliest days of humanity. God never intended for us to walk alone, but to receive counsel (Gen. 2).

Is emotional stress manifesting in physical symptoms?

Headaches, fatigue, digestive issues, or a racing heart are just a few symptoms that result from emotional stress. When you begin to notice any negative physical symptoms or unhelpful changes, a visit to your doctor is a good idea. If your doctor thinks stress may be the cause of your physical issues, counseling is an excellent way to address what may be contributing to your body's distressing response.

How am I coping with the pressures of life?

Life is full of stresses and pressures. In an effort to deal with the tensions, people find ways to cope. Some ways of coping are helpful and healthy. Engaging in exercise, time with friends, meditating on Scripture, praying, spending time outdoors, or creating a quiet space for yourself are all examples of constructive coping. Other forms of coping are less healthy and are distractions that can compound problems.

If you find yourself coping with stress by turning to addictive habits such as drugs or alcohol, indulging in comfort food, excessive TV watching, scrolling social media, or other escapes, talking to someone is a wise and needed step. Falling into addictive habits or isolating from others are unhealthy ways of coping with life's stressors and can begin to cause problems. Outbursts of anger, venting through gossip, acts of self-harm, or detaching, are also unhealthy ways of coping. If you notice these becoming a part of your life, seeking counsel would be wise.



Are your relationships strained or struggling?

Relationships are challenging. Whether with co-workers, your church family, your spouse, your children, or your parents, no relationship is immune to hard times. Even the best of friendships can take a turn in a difficult direction and can challenge you in unexpected ways. Marriage and family can fall into cycles of conflict leaving you feeling hopeless.

If you feel stuck in conflict and cannot seem to make progress toward resolution, this is a good time to seek counsel. Finding a counselor who can connect the love of Christ and the wisdom of the Scriptures to the interpersonal struggles you face can be a great encouragement.

Have your friends or family expressed concern?

Other people often see us more clearly than we see ourselves. When friends and family voice concerns about you, don't ignore them. It can be hard to see how things are affecting you when the situation has become so much a part of your everyday life. If people who care about you say they have noticed things that concern them, humbly listen and reach out for help.

The Lord does not intend for you to struggle alone. Take advantage of the circle of care God has provided through friends and family but consider counseling as another avenue of care given to you by the Lord.

If after reading this chapter you feel counseling might be a good next step, continue reading as we will discuss the details of what counseling should look like and what to look for in a counselor.

CHAPTER 2

Finding a Counselor



If you have made the decision to take the step toward counseling, finding the right counselor is important. We are going to answer four questions commonly asked by those who have decided to pursue counseling. These are questions you are likely to ask now or will ask as you move down the path toward making an appointment. The answers to these questions can serve as a guide. They provide helpful tips and direction to assist you in determining the best route for your counseling needs.

Question 1: Should I see a biblical counselor?

For some, the answer to this question will be determined by the accessibility of biblical counseling. In many areas, biblical counseling is becoming more readily available through churches, counseling ministries, or virtual counseling. For others, it may be harder to find a biblical counselor. Whenever possible, prioritize finding a counselor of the same faith.

Biblical counseling focuses on our deepest problem and our ultimate solution. Our deepest problem is the sin that has corrupted all of life and broken our original relationship with God. Our broken relationship with God has consequences psychologically, relationally, and even physically. We are fallen and we live in a fallen world. The gospel offers healing for our brokenness and comfort for our sorrows. Our ultimate solution is a perfect, sinless Savior who can rescue us from the effects of sin. That is the main reason biblical counseling is an excellent option for Christians seeking care.

But that is not all; here are some additional reasons for considering biblical counseling:

- **Biblical counseling has a fundamentally different worldview than secular counseling.** It conceptualizes our problems and struggles in a distinctly biblical way. It diagnoses disordered worship by bringing our attention to what may have captivated our hearts. It also comforts strugglers and sufferers with hope-filled eternal truth. Biblical counseling focuses on the promises of God versus the wisdom of men. It is effective and powerful to bring about transformative heart change even if our circumstances don't always improve.
- **Biblical counseling offers a fuller, more holistic perspective.** Like secular counseling, it addresses emotional, relational, and physical struggles and suffering but, unlike secular counseling, it specifically addresses the need for spiritual care and growth. This care and encouragement toward growth is anchored in the Scripture and prayerfully guided by the Holy Spirit. Biblical counseling centralizes your walk with the Lord as you move toward change.

- **Biblical counseling offers eternal hope versus temporary relief.**

While temporary relief can be very helpful, it is not all there is and sometimes it is not always possible. When circumstances don't change, it is profoundly helpful to know that in the face of unrelenting suffering, we have hope beyond circumstances.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, yet our inner self is being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary affliction is producing for us an eternal glory that is far beyond comparison. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 COR. 4:16-18

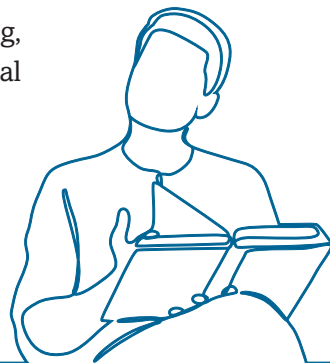
Question 2: What steps do I need to take before deciding on a counselor?

- **Pray** – Take this decision to the Lord. Commit to praying for guidance as you seek a counselor. Ask others close to you to pray as well.
- **Explore** – Ask friends, family members, or your pastor, for a referral. If someone you know has had a good experience with a counselor, there is a good chance you will too. As you continue to search, read counselor bios on websites and look at the philosophy of care of a counseling ministry. Read the counselor's or counseling ministry's statement of faith. Look at their other connections in ministry.
- **Interview** – Ask for a consultation. It is very normal for counselors to give free initial consultations. These brief meetings allow you to ask a few questions about the counselor as well as explore what you can expect from a meeting with them. You will also be able to share a little of why you are pursuing counseling to see if your need is within their scope of experience. Consultations are not counseling sessions but they are a way to have a short conversation with the counselor before you make your decision.

Question 3: What qualities or qualifications should I look for in a biblical counselor?

- **Look at their faith** – Don't only look for what they say they believe but also how it is played out in their lives. How do they engage with God's Word? How involved are they in their church or ministry? What kind of impact has following Jesus had on their own life?
- **Look at their experience** – Here you want to look at their training and also their years of experience. There is much wisdom that is gained through years in the counseling room that goes beyond a degree. On the other hand, having someone well trained in a specific field of care is also valuable. A counselor with an academic degree in counseling or certificates in biblical counseling has invested significantly to be well-equipped to care for you. You may also ask if they have had their own experience with counseling. Often, the best counselors are the ones who have been in the other chair as a counselee.
- **Look at their passion** – Find out why they do what they do. What was their motivation for getting into the field and what keeps them there? These are questions you can ask during a consultation and the answers will reveal whether you are just an appointment on their work calendar or a person they feel called to walk with.

As mentioned, we always encourage biblical counseling, but we recognize there are some circumstances where it could be wise to pursue something else. Something perhaps in addition to biblical counseling, or sometimes, as an alternative to biblical counseling for a season.



Question 4: When might it be helpful to see a secular counselor?

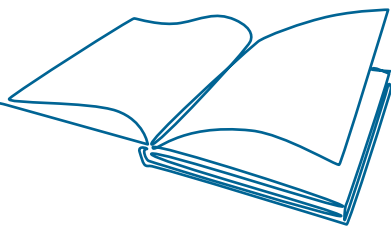
When biblical counseling is unavailable, you may need to find a counselor in the secular field. But lack of availability is not the only reason why a secular counselor might be an equitable choice. Therefore, we want to give you some guidance on the subject.

Here are three reasons you might consider a secular counselor:

- **Limited trusted resources.** It's possible that you don't have access to solid biblical counseling, in which case secular counseling may be the best option. In other situations, it may be more advantageous to see a counselor who is not a Christian than to see a counselor who identifies as a Christian but whose counsel is not biblically sound. In either case, it may be better to see a secular counselor than to forgo receiving needed help.
- **When a specialist is needed.** Some issues are more systemic or organic in nature and can be outside of the scope of care that your biblical counselor feels qualified to handle. This can include issues related to trauma, significant psychological or medical disorders, addiction, eating disorders, severe OCD, or if a person's wellbeing is at risk. It can also be helpful to consider secular care when a psychological evaluation and medication may be needed. In cases where court testimony may be required, such as in child custody situations where clinical evidence of psychological health might be requested, a clinical professional counselor is a good idea.

- **When someone is not a believer.** If you are seeking counseling related to your relationship with someone else, such as in marriage counseling or family counseling, and someone in the relationship is not a believer and refuses to go to a biblical counselor, then secular counseling is an option to consider.

With these four questions answered we trust you will be in a much better place to consider taking the step toward counseling. Ultimately, biblical counseling provides a richer approach to the human struggle. It offers biblical wisdom and a deeper understanding of how people change. However, no matter what kind of counseling you decide on, the next chapter can help you get the most out of your time with a counselor.



CHAPTER 3

Getting the Most out of Your Counseling



Now that you have made the important decision to get counseling, it can be helpful if you are committed to several things during the counseling process. Here are four suggestions that are important in making the counseling experience most effective.

Be honest

Honesty is not just about what you reveal but also about what you conceal. You may feel you are being honest because what you shared in your session was the truth. However, what was not shared can be equally or even more important to the counseling process. It is best to always present a complete picture of the situation.

One reason people are cautious to be fully transparent is due in part to a natural hesitation to open up to someone they do not yet know. This is normal. It can help to discuss confidentiality and privacy concerns before you get started to alleviate any fears and reduce reluctance to being fully transparent.

Other reasons for being less open may come from unhelpful motivations. For example, you may withhold information because of *fear of judgment*, a temptation common to all. It is not that you are afraid of your counselor; rather, you may be afraid of what they might think of you if you share the whole truth. Another common hindrance to full honesty is *pride*. Like fear of judgment, pride encourages the keeping up of appearances. Even in the midst of seeking help from a counselor, the desire to save face can sabotage your steps toward help and healing if you are tempted to be less than fully honest.

Scripture tells us that keeping silent about our sins or transgressions before God will bring misery (Ps. 32:1-8). We must be honest before God but we should also be honest with those who God provides to help us. Candor is risky, but it is necessary for counseling. Lean into honesty and participate in the accountability and wisdom that can come from trusting your counselor enough to be fully honest.



Slow down

When people enter the counseling process a common question asked is how long it will take. They want to know how many counseling sessions will be necessary until they feel better or until their situation will change. This is not an unreasonable question, but it often reveals an incorrect view of counseling and the process of change. It is important to remember that you are not a problem to fix or solve. You, like me and everyone else, are complex individuals. Your situation is complex. You deserve the attention of careful exploration. Counseling deals with the deepest issues of the heart; it takes time to draw out what is there (Prov. 20:5).

God is not in a hurry. He knows what you need and knows the best timing to bring it about. The change you desire is a process and the process is often where you learn more about yourself and God. The slow pace of counseling allows for the uncovering of fears, desires, and beliefs that lie deep within our hearts. It is in the unhurried pace that you create space to see what God is teaching you. Trust the process and avoid the temptation to rush it.

Pray

The Bible says that prayer is powerful in its effect (Jas. 5:16). Prayer changes things, and one of the most important things it changes is your own heart. Pray before, during, and after your session. Pray for your heart to be changed through the time with your counselor. Pray that you would be sensitive to God and His Word. Pray that God would encourage and strengthen you as you seek to work through the challenges you face.

Pray for your counselor too. Counselors fight their own battles with fear of man in the counseling room. They too can be tempted to rush toward change and overlook moments where a long look at Jesus is needed once again. Your prayers for them are invaluable. Pray that

they would be fully dependent on the Holy Spirit. Pray that they would counsel out of a life that is abiding with Jesus. As a counselor, I have been shown many kindnesses by those I counsel, but the thing I am most grateful for is prayer.

Follow Through

Finally, getting the most out of counseling requires your diligence in application outside of the counseling sessions. Merely hearing the Word doesn't count for much. Instead, it is putting God's Word into practice that results in blessing (Jas. 1:22). James then goes on to use a helpful illustration: the person who looks at their face in a mirror does so to check if anything needs to be changed. (Food in between teeth? Hair out place?) It would be odd to look in a mirror, see a needed change, and yet not do anything. Looking in the mirror is necessary but not sufficient. Likewise, looking at how God's Word speaks into your life during a biblical counseling session is necessary, but not enough. The real benefits start to unfold in your life when you take what you have learned in counseling and begin to work it out in your everyday life.

Practically this will mean taking the time to complete any assigned homework, allowing space for meditation on the Scriptures that were shared, or scheduling follow-up sessions. You may need to follow through on convictions and allow the Spirit to work in your heart. Giving yourself time and space to process the session can help you get the most out of the new insights the Lord may have revealed.

Of course, the counseling experience is full of all sorts of elements but keeping these four suggestions in mind can help you get the most out of it.

Next, let's consider the role the Bible plays in counseling.

CHAPTER 4



Understanding the Role of the Bible

A key distinctive in the biblical counseling approach is, of course, the role the Bible plays. The “unfolding of your words gives light” (Ps. 119:130), and this is a wonderful thing. God's Word brings light into our darkness, and clarity into our complexity. But although Scripture brings life-enhancing wisdom, sadly it can also be misused. When it is misused, great harm or confusion can result. That's why we want to equip and encourage you to think clearly about the role of the Bible in the biblical counseling experience.