

Many people believe, erroneously, that only people with serious problems go for counseling. It's also a common misconception that there is no reason to get help unless you're really troubled. After all, why would someone without problems need or want to talk to a "shrink?" Well, while it's true that people with severe emotional difficulties often do use counseling services, lots of people without serious problems benefit from counseling as well. It's easy to see why if you understand what counseling really is. First of all, counseling is a process of talking with a trained professional about what is going on in your life in order to learn more about yourself, find new ways of coping with or adjusting to particular circumstances, or understand how you feel. Counseling may provide a nonjudgmental place for you to explore your thoughts and feelings in complete privacy. It may help you understand your behaviors and relationships. It may also help you assess the seriousness of your worries.

So, what we're really talking about is self-education, or learning about yourself. In this regard, counseling is an educational tool available to help you grow as a person. Counseling is therefore a useful mechanism for anyone, whether they have serious troubles or not. In fact, it is a true sign of personal strength (not weakness) to seek out this self-knowledge in an effort to understand yourself better.

Some people seek out counseling because they are unhappy. Some are curious. Some are confused. Some are angry. Some want to explore family concerns, friendship and relationship issues, identity questions, body image worries, concentration difficulties. There are unlimited reasons to seek out counseling. Some are serious and some are not. Some people meet with a counselor only once or twice and some meet regularly. It all depends on what is needed. That is something that you and your counselor would determine together.

Who are these counselors? Mental health professionals may be called counselors, psychologists, social workers, or psychiatrists, depending upon their training and professional education. All may have experience working with students and families. Only psychiatrists are authorized to prescribe medication, and if medication is indicated other professionals will coordinate services with a psychiatrist to facilitate this. Mental health professionals are trained to be nonjudgmental, empathic, collaborative, and to maintain the confidentiality of the therapeutic relationship. This means that your privacy will be respected. Depending upon your age and the setting in which you seek counseling, there may be some involvement with your parents, and your counselor will be able to explain this to you. In all settings, if you present a danger to yourself or others your counselor may need to talk to others in order to ensure safety.

If you are not sure whether or not counseling is right for you, there are several ways to figure this out. You may choose to talk to a friend who has gone for counseling and ask what it is like. Ask for feedback about the counselor in particular. Was s/he approachable, helpful, and easy to talk to? Perhaps you could speak with a trusted adult who could assist you in exploring these questions. Better yet, you could speak directly with a counselor who could help you decide if counseling will meet your needs. Discussion of your questions, goals, and concerns may help you and your counselor decide if working together seems like a good idea. After all, there is little to lose but a few minutes of your time, and the potential for growth is enormous.