

Should **Christians** Seek **Professional Counseling?**



Where is "Professional Counseling" in the bible?

Counseling was really God's idea in the first place. For example, He instructs us to support and encourage one another, bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), pray for one another (James 5:16), admonish one another (I Thess. 5:14), weep with those who weep, and laugh with those who are happy (Rom.12:15)

There is also biblical precedence for the role of a counselor or "wise man" in the life of a believer.

Starting with Saul, the Hebrew kings traditionally employed three types of people to be in their "court" (the rough equivalent of the Cabinet to the President) to advise him in decision-making. The three types of advisers were the scribe, the seer, and the sage. The scribe gave advice to the king based on his knowledge of Scripture. The seer or prophet gave advice based on his ability to receive revelation from God. The sage gave advice based upon his accumulated wisdom and depth of insight (1 Chr.27:32). Thus, a spiritual giant such as David valued and sought after advice from identified "expert counselors" as well as from God's revelation when it came to conducting the affairs of the kingdom of Israel.

The role of sage is played in today's society by professional counselors. In Proverbs 8:2-36 we learn that the sage accumulates his wisdom by going out into the world and observing the natural world which God has in His wisdom created. He recognizes a cause and effect structure, reflects on it, and forms principles by organizing the information into an understandable format (Prov. 24:30-34). This is what we now call the method of science. Psychology as a science uses this method to observe and understand the patterns in human behavior, patterns which God has created. Christian professional counselors take these facts and principles and combine them with a knowledge of God's Word to understand human behavior, feelings, and relationships in the light of all God's wisdom.

Well, isn't professional counseling only for "crazy" people?

This is like saying we can only see a doctor if we're very sick. Many of the principles that apply to developing physical health apply to mental health as well. Counseling can be growth-oriented, much in the same way that we exercise regularly and eat properly to build our physical strength. It can also be prevention-oriented, much as we see a medical doctor for check-ups or take vitamins to try to avoid colds. Also, it is often easier to resolve a problem when it is in its earliest stages of development, in the same way that cancer is more treatable if it is caught early. Many people come into counseling saying, "I realize now that this problem has been building up for a long, long time. I'm sorry I didn't come in sooner. I've wasted so much time

What good does "just talking" do anyway?

The Bible puts special emphasis on the power of the tongue. For example, God knows our sins and our needs even before we speak. Yet, we are encouraged to confess and ask. The act of speech has a special purpose which involves putting into action our will and increases our openness to help and forgiveness. This is the beginning of healing in both a spiritual and psychological sense. Counseling is also not just talk. It is a relationship, and relationships are the principle means of healing and growth. For example, it is our relationship with God, mediated by our words and thoughts, that brings salvation and healing not just the words themselves. Similarly, our healing happens when we are in relationship with others.

But, isn't steadfast prayer enough to overcome our difficulties?

While prayer is a powerful instrument of healing, sometimes it may not be enough. This is not because God is unwilling to answer directly with healing, but because God sometimes chooses other people to be the instruments of healing. God has formed us into a body, each with special functions, so that we will have to interact with one another, depend on each other, and grow with each other. Thus, God uses relationships with others, as well as relationship with Himself, to bring healing

Why can't I just talk to a friend or family member?

Very often, talking with a friend or family member can help a great deal. However, many people are most often self-conscious about asking for help because of shame. We are afraid of judgment, or derision, or embarrassment. We may feel that our problems or difficulties show us to be not good enough as a Christian, or that our faith is weak. It often hurts our pride to admit to struggles and failures. Unfortunately, sometimes it is that pride itself which is a barrier to healing. For this reason, it is often easier to talk to a professional counselor than to a friend. The

counseling relationship is designed to be a safe opportunity to discuss painful issues that we think others may not understand or accept. The professional counselor is even mandated by law, with only some exceptions, to keep what we talk about strictly confidential. The counselor can also lend special skills and a neutral objectivity that friends or family may not have.

So why can't I just go to my pastor?

In many cases you can. Your pastor, who has special training in meeting the spiritual needs of a congregation, is uniquely equipped to encourage, console, and exhort people in a variety of situations. For example, pastors counsel those needing salvation, hope, grace, and understanding of forgiveness of sin. They pray with those who are suffering personal tragedy or loss. They can give guidance about God's will by illuminating Scripture and helping people apply its wisdom in today's world. Clergy prepare those anticipating marriage. They also meet with those experiencing stress in their marriage, helping couples to refocus and problem-solve. Our pastors, as great sources of inspiration and guidance, connect us to God and to other people. Clergy are essential bridge-builders as they respond to God's call and shepherd God's people.

However, as connection-makers, pastors are only part of God's plan to help the hurting. Pastors most often are the front-line counselors who respond to desperate calls in the middle of the night. Responding to many difficult situations which are within their calling, but which sometimes they confess are beyond their training, ministers are the first link in the chain of help and of healing. Many pastors have special training in counseling and crisis intervention. However, problems such as severe depression, anxiety, alcoholism, domestic violence, sexual abuse, sexual addiction, and long-term marital conflict may need outside intervention. These are examples of serious problems which not only involve the spiritual area of life but the physical and psychological as well. A referral may be necessary not because our pastors are incapable or uninterested in addressing these problems, but rather they want you to receive the best care possible. Often, this care comes through a trained mental health specialist or team of specialists. So, yes, you can go to your pastor for help, advice, encouragement, and, perhaps, a referral to a professional counselor.

Written By Keith Clark, PsyD, Evelyn Cochran, MA, Cathryn Harris, PhD, N. Leigh Nicholson, MA



1370 N. Brea Blvd., Suite 245
Fullerton, CA 92835

800-998-6329 ~ TurningPointCounseling.org