

## Realistic Expectations: How Counseling Really Works

To many people, mental health counseling is a misunderstood and confusing aspect of health care. The most prevalent misconceptions related to counseling fall into the following categories: the counselor will “fix” me in a few sessions, the counselor will make decisions for me and “tell me the right thing to do” and that I (the client) will just lie on a couch and tell the counselor about my dreams or other random thoughts. Let’s take each of these misconceptions one by one and consider a more realistic portrayal of the counseling process.

### **“Fixing”**

I believe the idea of the counselor “fixing” the client in a few sessions has various origins. Perhaps the idea arises from the current distress level of the person seeking treatment and they want the emotional pain or life complications to quickly cease. Maybe the “quick fix” view of treatment is a result of the convenience in many facets in our society, including health care. Regardless of the reason, it is helpful to know that counseling is most successful as a process. It has likely taken a long time for the problems to develop; therefore, it will take time to appropriately develop problem-solving strategies and the skills to execute them. Additionally, it will take time to cultivate a feeling of comfort with your counselor in order to build the trust necessary for a helpful therapeutic relationship. The previous point leads nicely into my next thought about the counselor’s role in client decision-making.

### **“The Counselor Will Tell Me the Right Thing to Do”**

Although I understand why people might view the counselor as an expert, the counselor is somewhat of an expert in the field of psychology, but not an expert on you! The overall goal of counseling is to teach a client how to live life in a happier, healthier way. This goal cannot be achieved solely by the counselor providing directives or giving advice. Clients truly flourish when they are educated on decision-making skills and empowered to attempt to carry out strategies arrived from a thorough discussion between the counselor and client. Advice-giving creates an unhealthy dependence on the counselor and does not promote accountability for one’s own health. Similarly, this notion transitions into our final misconception about the balance of communication between the counselor and the client.

### **“Lay on the Couch and Tell Me Your Dreams”**

It is true that in Sigmund Freud’s heyday in psychoanalysis (1800’s in Vienna, Austria), sessions were conducted in this way: the patient would lie relaxed on a couch, often not even making eye contact with the counselor and discuss dreams/random thoughts. The counselor would rarely speak and only write down the information from the client during the session. As psychological practice evolved, it was discovered that more meaningful change could occur from a collaborative and interactive relationship between counselor and client. While listening to the patient is a valuable aspect of the counseling process, the counselor also fulfills the roles of educator, example of appropriate behavior, investigator, and encourager. The counselor can also let the client know how the world perceives them or how they make others feel.

I hope the preceding explanations are useful in demystifying the counseling process. It has been my experience that when one has realistic expectations of this process, and enter counseling with the intention of being a full participant, they can better utilize mental health services toward a true, long-term benefit.

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