

What to Expect in Your First Session

Starting counseling can feel unfamiliar. Knowing what usually happens during the first appointment can make the process easier to understand.

The First Session Is a Starting Point

Your first counseling session is an opportunity for you and your therapist to begin getting to know one another. The therapist will learn more about what brings you to counseling, what you would like help with, and what you hope will be different as a result of therapy. You do not have to explain everything perfectly or have all of your goals figured out before you arrive.

You Will Talk About What Brings You to Counseling

You may be asked about your current concerns, when they began, how they are affecting your daily life, and what you have already tried. Your therapist may also ask about important relationships, school or work, stressors, coping strategies, previous counseling experiences, and other background information that helps provide context for your concerns.

Your Therapist Will Review How Counseling Works

The first session may include a review of confidentiality, privacy, communication, scheduling, attendance, and other practice policies. Your therapist can also explain the counseling process, what you can expect from sessions, and circumstances in which confidentiality may have legal or ethical limits.

You Can Ask Questions

Counseling is collaborative. You can ask questions about the therapist's approach, how sessions are structured, what treatment may involve, or anything about the process that is unclear. It is appropriate to discuss what helps you feel comfortable participating in therapy and what you need in order to understand the work you will be doing together.

You Will Begin Identifying Goals

You and your therapist may begin discussing what you would like to accomplish in counseling. Goals can be specific, such as learning strategies to manage anxiety, or broader, such as improving coping, relationships, mood, decision-making, or adjustment to a difficult situation. Goals can be refined as therapy progresses.

You May Not Cover Everything in One Appointment

The first session is not expected to resolve every concern or cover your entire history. Some of the appointment is devoted to understanding your needs and establishing a direction for treatment. Additional information can be discussed over time as it becomes relevant to your counseling goals.

What Happens at the End of the Session?

Before the session ends, you and your therapist may summarize the main concerns discussed, identify initial goals or next steps, and discuss whether continued counseling is appropriate. Depending on the treatment approach, you may also leave with a strategy to practice, something to observe between sessions, or a topic to continue exploring at the next appointment.

It Is Okay To...

- Take time to think before answering.
- Say when you do not understand a question.
- Ask why something is being discussed.
- Correct information that was misunderstood.
- Let your therapist know when something is difficult to discuss.

Before Your Appointment

Complete any required paperwork and review practice policies before your scheduled session. Think about the main concern you want to address and what you would most like your therapist to understand about it. You do not need to prepare a detailed story or script.

Remember: The first session begins the counseling process. You and your therapist are working together to understand your concerns, determine what you want from therapy, and establish a plan for moving forward.