



## What to Expect in Your First Counseling Session

By STEVE BRESSERT, PH.D.

Are you about to go to a counselor for the first time? Whatever your reason for seeking help, you will be more at ease and get better results if you know what to expect.

In your first session, the therapist typically will ask certain questions about you and your life. This information helps her make an initial assessment of your situation. Questions she might ask include:

**Why you sought therapy.** A particular issue probably led you to seek counseling. The therapist has to understand your surface problem(s) before she can get to the deeper issues.

**Your personal history and current situation.** The therapist will ask you a series of questions about your life. For example, because family situations play an important role in who you are, she'll ask about your family history and your current family situation.

**Your current symptoms.** Other than knowing the reason you sought therapy, the therapist will attempt to find out if you're suffering from other symptoms of your problem. For example, your problem might be causing difficulty at work.

The therapist will use this information to better understand your problem. And, while she may make a diagnosis at the end of your first visit, it's more likely that a diagnosis will take a few more sessions.

**Don't just sit there.** Therapy is a team effort. If you don't take an active part in the session, you won't find the counseling experience valuable. Here are some things you can do to make your first session as successful as possible.

**Be open.** Therapists are trained to ask the right questions, but they're not mind readers. The therapist can do her job more effectively if you answer the questions openly and honestly.

**Be prepared.** Before you get to the session, know how to describe “what’s wrong,” and to describe your feelings about your problem. One way to prepare is to write down the reasons you’re seeking help. Make a list and then read it out loud. Hearing yourself say it a few times will help you describe things more clearly to the therapist.

**Ask questions.** The more you understand the counseling experience or how counseling works, the more comfortable you’ll be. Ask questions about the therapy process, and ask the therapist to repeat anything you don’t understand.

**Be open and honest about your feelings.** A lot will be going through your head in this first session. Listen to your own reactions and feelings, and share them with the therapist. You’ll both learn from these insights.

Be sure to go to your first session with realistic expectations. Therapy is not a quick fix for your problem, rather it is a process. With some effort on your part and a strong relationship with your therapist, it can be a successful tool toward resolving problems.

**APA Reference**

Bressert, S. (2006). What to Expect in Your First Counseling Session. *Psych Central*. Retrieved on January 30, 2013, from <http://psychcentral.com/lib/2006/what-to-expect-in-your-first-counseling-session/>