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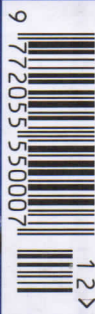
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Can you cope?

Andrew Harris reviews Counselling in the North West

To 'cope' may not sound like the most important verb in the English language but the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as 'dealing successfully with something difficult'. As everyone – possibly except a lucky few – face a series of challenges and disappointments through life, our happiness and wellbeing depend upon our ability to cope with them. For people who cannot because of bad luck or just too many challenges or disappointments there are often three choices; recourse to drug or alcohol misuse which solves nothing, medication prescribed by a GP - although this may deal more with symptoms than causes - or counselling which can help mild to moderate mental health issues and be a solution.

We need to stop being embarrassed about mental health problems which affect one in four people during their lifetime. Interestingly, research in 2014 by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP is a professional body for counsellors) established that 28% of people have consulted a counsellor or psychotherapist – up from 21% in 2010. The same research found that 69% of people think that the world would be a better place if people talked more about their feelings.

So why don't we?

Counselling is a type of talking therapy that allows a person to talk about their problems and feelings in a confidential and dependable environment. It aims to help you explore difficult feelings so that you can deal with and overcome issues that are causing emotional pain or making you feel uncomfortable or worse. It can help with the problems listed in the panel.

There are FIVE routes or pathways to counselling in the north west:

- Your school, college, university and – increasingly – your place of work should have arrangements to link you to an independent counsellor able to



Counselling portrayed by actors

help you at their expense. The counsellors used will have experience of the likely problems involved where mental health issues may arise. The health sector call these 'settings' which is where many mental health issues arise.

- Many charities serving the elderly, disabled people and victims often provide counselling which is free or subsidised. The counsellors engaged have really useful specialist knowledge of the condition or trauma which has caused or aggravated mental health problems. The situation with mental health charities is less clear; Lancashire Mind, for example, has stopped providing counselling directly but pioneered links between voluntary sector counselling providers and the self-referral 'Mind Matters' service provided by the Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust.

- Relationship counselling is specialised and provided by Relate and Marriage Care in our region although some private counsellors offer this service. Relate charges vary branch by branch but Preston Relate, for example, charge £55 per hour but with concessions for the less well off. Marriage Care ask for donations with their Preston Centre, for example, suggesting £40 per hour if it can be afforded. Both have many centres in the north west and can be reached by a single contact number for all of them; it is 0800 389 3801 for Marriage Care and 0300 100 1234 for Relate.

- For those without these special needs or links your GP is able to prescribe counselling as an alternative to – or to complement – medication or you can self-refer. As psychological remedies (aka counselling) were seen to be effective the government introduced a programme called 'Improved Access to Psychological Therapies' in 2010. Despite this there is usually a waiting list but this is down to a few weeks in many areas.

- As the previous options can be slow and involve intermediaries there is the alternative of using a private counsellor although this will typically involve 6 one- hour sessions at £40-60 each. Your counsellor should be a member of a professional body such as the BACP - and likeable.

Counselling, like most professions, uses terms which mean more to practitioners than clients. Your columnist feels that 'talking therapy' understates what is involved whilst 'psychotherapy' is rather unfairly guilty by association with Alfred Hitchcock's horror film PSYCHO. It is counselling.

The language of counselling can also be confusing. Relationship counselling is specialised for obvious reasons as the counsellor is usually – but not always - dealing with two people. On the other hand Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (better known as CBT) is a mystery to those in need although it is recognised as being very effective. Cognitive means gaining knowledge through thought and the senses so CBT can help you to manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave.

CBT cannot remove your problems but it can help you to cope with them in a more positive way. It is based on the concept that your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and actions are interconnected and that negative thoughts and feelings can trap you in a vicious cycle. CBT aims to help you crack this cycle by breaking down overwhelming problems into smaller parts and showing you how to change these negative patterns to improve the way you feel. Unlike other types of counselling, CBT deals with your current problems rather than focusing on issues from your past. It looks for practical ways to improve your state of mind on a daily basis.

If CBT is recommended for you it will typically involve 6 one-hour weekly or fortnightly sessions with progress then reviewed to decide if more sessions are needed. During each session you will work with your counsellor to break down your problems into their separate parts – such as your thoughts, physical feelings and actions. You and your counsellor will analyse these areas to work out if they are unrealistic or unhelpful and to determine the effect they have on each other and on you. The counsellor can then help you to work out how to change unhelpful thoughts and behaviours. These can then be used in your daily life then reviewed at the next session. The eventual aim of CBT is to teach you to apply the skills you have learnt during your treatment to your daily life. This should help you to cope with your problems and stop them having a negative impact on you. The resulting benefits should continue long after your course has finished.

Research has shown that CBT can be as effective as medication in treating some mental health problems. Compared to some other forms of counselling CBT can also be completed in a relatively short period of time. CBT does, however, depend upon the full commitment and co-operation of the person being counselled.

Our society becomes more competitive as it becomes more efficient and productive. We now measure and value individual achievement far more than collective effort. This creates more challenges and pressures on individuals from school days to retirement and beyond. The advent of counselling is our response. Please use it if - for a while - you cannot cope. Counselling can be your way back.

Andrew Harris has chaired charities which provide counselling in the north west. He has used NHS and other sources to verify the facts behind this article for which Mr Tom Lemmon MBACP, MNCP – an experienced counsellor - kindly provided technical advice.

WHAT CAN BE HELPED BY COUNSELLING?

- Anxiety ; Depression ; Bereavement
- Relationship Problems or Breakdown
- Coping with Serious Illness e.g. cancer,
- Eating Disorders e.g. anorexia, bulimia
- Addictions e.g. drugs, alcohol, gambling
- Bullying, exam stress & self-harming
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Redundancy or work-related stress
- Issues involving sexual orientation
- Other traumas, Phobias and OCD

These are only examples and are not comprehensive