

What is a ‘therapeutic relationship?’

“I’ve had about, 12 different counsellors over... 8 years. Some of them have been good but I know that it’s just a job to them, so they will leave at some point. I did meet one woman I thought was great but she got a new job after about 4 sessions, so what is the point? I mean if you do get to know someone there is no guarantee they will stick around and then you have to start right back at the beginning with someone new. Even if they say they’ve read your file, they ask you to go through your history all over again. I feel like I am the one who does all the work. This one guy I had hardly even remembered me when I saw him the second time. I mean why should I bother? It is just their job, but it’s My Life!”
– Louise, 27

Interesting fact:

In research studies of recovery from addiction, one of the best predictors of recovery is having a good ‘therapeutic relationship’ with a health professional.

Other predictors were having really supportive relationships with friends and family members, and spending time with non-users who had also recovered from addiction.

A therapeutic relationship is between you and a health professional, it’s different to all other relationships. Take your time to build trust in the doctor or counsellor. If you have seen lots of counsellors in the past, before you see someone new think about (and maybe write down) what worked in the past and what didn’t. Like all relationships, they are complicated. Try to understand what went wrong. (e.g. “they let me down”, “as soon as I showed them the real me, they rejected me” “they never really understood me” “I never did trust them”). If a similar pattern keeps playing out with all your past counsellors, then it is important you address this up front with your new counsellor.

Counsellors know there are many reasons why committing to recovery is challenging. Their role is to support you to get the most out of your treatment and help you achieve your recovery goals. But it is important to realise the ‘recovery work’ is up to you; your counsellor can’t do it for you. But if you can stick it out and establish a good relationship with a counsellor, it is one of the ‘pieces of the puzzle’ that will help you to recover.

- Stay engaged with your treatment and work towards having a good relationship with your counsellor. This relationship should be characterised by trust, respect and importantly, your doctor or counsellor should give you confidence and hope that you can recover. Most counsellors are trying their best, but sometimes two people just don’t ‘click’! If you really don’t like someone, ask for a new counsellor.
- It is good to know what to expect before you start. When first meeting a counsellor, ask them how long they anticipate your treatment to last. There are many factors that determine the duration of your treatment. Some treatment is most effective over a short period while other treatments may take longer. Some services may specialise in particular treatments, or be restricted by funding to only offer certain treatments. The general rule is: know what you are signing up for! Be part of the planning your own treatment.
- Think about your time with your counsellor as an opportunity to practice different ways of relating and behaving in situations. They can help you can learn new relationship skills. For example: if you have problems being assertive with family, without becoming emotional, angry or aggressive. Ask your counsellor to come up with ideas and strategies to help you change these ways of reacting and find better ones.



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Why regular sessions are best

"I do see counsellors but, sometimes it's a really bad idea to see a counsellor when you're not in the mood, cause they just get annoyed with you and give up on you. When I am feeling OK I don't want to have to talk about my using or why I use cause I just want to enjoy feeling OK. And if I've had a relapse I don't really want to go in for a lecture. So yeah I do miss appointments but they also cancel on me at the last minute so I don't get what the big deal is. I mean sometimes they make you wait for ages but if I'm late I get my appointment cancelled. It's hypocritical".

- Mark, 34

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It's hard to build a trusting relationship with someone who you only see every now and then. Like all relationships, they need work and what you put in is usually what you get out. So you can see why it's difficult for someone to work with you if you don't see them regularly. We all have good and bad days. Your counsellor knows that recovery can sometimes be two steps forward then two steps backwards. Seeing you through all the phases of your recovery will help the clinician to become more attuned to your needs.

Think about your treatment as a course of antibiotics. If you take them as prescribed and finish the whole course- which often involves continuing to take them for a few days after you start feeling better- you are more likely to make a complete recovery. If you don't the infection may return in a more virulent form. It's the same with treatment. If you make the effort and commit to regular sessions with your counsellor you have a much greater chance of maintaining your recovery.

When you are feeling good about yourself, it's best to make plans about the future. You are more likely to stay committed to your recovery if you receive positive reinforcement about the hard work you are doing.

- Talk about your appointments with your counsellor and try to troubleshoot any issues that prevent you from attending. If they are able to be resolved, it will help your recovery in the long run. Make a plan for what to do if you are running late. Should you ring and reschedule, or have a shorter session?
- Try booking sessions close together, if you feel that there is no momentum in the relationship or space out your sessions if you are struggling to get to appointments every week.
- Getting some basic information from your counsellor about the service and how they work will help you to understand the constraints on them. Ask your counsellor how many clients they have; if they are part-time or fulltime; if they work at other services; do they have to respond to other clients or patients in crisis; do they have another worker in their team who can be a back-up for you when they are sick or on holidays; and importantly what is their cancellation policy. Knowing this information will help you better prepare for and understand administrative issues that really shouldn't affect your treatment.



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Getting off the merry-go-round

"I don't really get why I should see a counsellor all the time. When I need help I call them and if I can find someone I go in otherwise I'll end up seeing someone at the hospital/police station anyway. I mean if I knew I was going to need them before hand I would make an appointment. But I can't predict that I am going to need someone on Thursday cause centre-link is going to stuff up my payments. I am not wasting my time going in if there is no reason".

- Felicity, 26

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Knowing there are people who can help in a crisis is important but it is only one service a counsellor can provide and crisis management is very different to ongoing counselling. It is good to remind yourself that over your recovery journey, maintaining regular counselling sessions or Doctor appointments can help you through a predicament and also help avoid further predicaments. As you get to know your counsellor, you and he/she can start identifying and predicting the things that contribute to a crisis. Being able to do this will enable you to jumping in early and stop things from snowballing.

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It might be stating the obvious, but the best time to work on crisis plans and what to do when you feel overwhelmed, is when you are feeling calm and supported. Just having a crisis plan in place can reduce the likelihood of you ending up in crisis at all, or stop a crisis from snowballing. Often a crisis happens, and then snowballs when we start having thoughts such as 'I can't cope' "I don't know what to do" "nothing is ever going to change" "I am going to feel this way forever" "nobody can help me" "nobody cares". If you have a crisis plan that reminds you who to go to for help, that all crises are short-term and will pass, and you have coped with worse in the past, then you can get through it.

- Talk about the events or situations that have lead to you needing crises intervention. With your counsellors develop a crisis management plan to help you identifying problems before they arise and implementing strategies to deal with the situation before it becomes a crisis.
- Review what happened, why it happened, how you felt, what you could have done differently and what you can put in place to mitigate it from happening like that in the future.
- Regular appointments with your counsellor will help you better manage stressful events and reduce their incidence.



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Stepping back and taking stock

“One day I had had a fight with my girlfriend before I went in so I was pretty fired up, and they wouldn’t have bar of me. They told me I had to come back another day. So I did but after waiting for ages, with no one saying anything to me I’d had enough. I blew up at the receptionist which I know was wrong but she should have told me or done something about it. I mean if it is so important for me to come in it should be so important for him to keep my appointment. They act like they want to help you but they only do if you play by their rules”.

– **Andrew, 32**

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Lets be honest, waiting rooms can be pretty awful places be when you are feeling frustrated. Even if you can distract yourself by reading a magazine or texting a friend, everyone struggles with having to wait to see their counsellor or Doctor. Finding yourself in frustrating situation does happen, so learning how to managing your reactions and reducing their frequency is important. These situations arise for many and various reasons be they other clients in crisis, counsellors being held up, technical problems at the service etc. Try to tell yourself that if that was you in crisis, you would want your counsellor to help you too or if you were having technical problems you’d want people to be patient.

- If you can’t wait without feeling overwhelmed, angry, scared or starting to get aggressive let the receptionist know that you are going for a walk around the block, or to get some fresh air out the front. If they agree to call you on your mobile when the Doctor is ready, even better.
- When you feel overwhelmed try and take yourself out of the stressful environment – do some breathing exercises or mindful walking (see scripts). Tell the people at reception you are struggling to wait, before you leave. Try to remain calm when you are explaining that you need some fresh air.
- Talk about a “waiting room” plan with your counsellor or Doctor. A waiting room plan might be as simple as bringing your MP3 player to listen to music, bringing a book or magazine to read, texting friends, doing a breathing exercise or all of the above. It might mean booking the first appointment time of the day, so you wont have to wait behind others. It might be saying to yourself that ‘practicing patience’ will help in your recovery. Hopefully you and your counsellor can find ways to make sure you get from the waiting room to your appointment, without harming your recovery.