

Counselling Information Sheet

Every year in the UK and globally, millions of people struggle with eating disorders. Furthermore, many of these sufferers and their families are faced with the life-threatening effects of their illness because the problem has not been recognised or treated soon enough. Counselling is one intervention that can be effective in helping people deal with and overcome eating disorders. This information sheet explores what counselling is, how it works, the benefits, and how it can assist people with eating disorders.

What is counselling?

Counselling is a specialty within psychology where trained professionals use psychological theories, knowledge, and techniques to help clients live through, cope with, and overcome any distress they might be experiencing. Individuals, families, groups, and couples seek the help of counsellors for all kinds of reasons: stress, anxiety, chronic or acute emotional problems, relationship issues, lack of purpose in life, alcohol and drug abuse, low self-esteem, career decisions, relationship problems and, indeed, eating disorders.

The issues counsellors help clients with are varied, but the general aim is to empower the client; counsellors want to see you make healthy, independent lifestyle choices, develop resilience and confidence, find your own answers, and become increasingly able to live a fulfilling, meaningful, and healthy life.

Although some counsellors become specialists and focus mainly on working with, for example, families or people effected by eating disorders, they are generally trained to be well-versed in a variety of therapeutic skills and techniques.

What are the different types of counselling?

Some counsellors employ one or more counselling techniques no matter the specific nature of a client's problem. The specific approach the counsellor adopts is mainly based on the particular school of psychological thought that informed their professional training. While some adopt a behavioural or cognitive-behavioural approach, others might be more oriented towards humanism, existentialism, or psychodynamics. By making yourself familiar with these terms and learning which approach might offer you the best support with your eating disorder, you will be better equipped to utilise counselling as part of your recovery (Table 1, Appendix 1). **Whichever type of counselling you choose, the relationship between yourself and your counsellor will be key – you need to trust your counsellor enough to share your thoughts and feelings, while also feeling completely accepted by them.**

How does counselling work?

Counsellors will have a sincere interest in your life and experiences, so that they can use the knowledge they gain about you for your benefit. To a counsellor, the question of “how can I use what I know about my client to help empower them?” is always significant.

Initially, counsellors might ask you some questions about your particular circumstances and issues. However, your time with the counsellor will be yours, so you are likely to do more talking than they are. This can be scary at first, especially if you are used to bottling things up inside. However, your counsellor will be aware of this and will support you as you find your voice. As you find your voice, try to be completely open and honest so that you can gain the most from the therapeutic process.

What are the benefits of counselling?

The benefits from counselling depend on many elements, including how motivated and committed you are to the process. Some of the main benefits include:

- ✓ **Confidentiality, trust and sincere interest.** Even well-meaning friends can't always be trusted to keep private information private. A counsellor will offer you complete confidentiality under most conditions. The exception being if they felt you might be of harm to yourself or others, in which case, they might need to break confidentiality. Even then, most counsellors will discuss this with your first in order to gain your consent.
- ✓ **The chance to express yourself freely, without fear of judgement.** Unfortunately, this is not always possible in ordinary relationships. We can find ourselves not only being judged by others, but also adapting to how we feel a person wants us to be. Your counsellor will accept and respect you as you are; they are not there to judge.
- ✓ **Insight into yourself.** Including insight into your thinking and emotional patterns, such as those that might knock down self-esteem and hamper your recovery.
- ✓ **An opportunity to alleviate stress and anxiety.** This is gained through having an attentive and empathic counsellor and the appointment space and time set aside for you to talk.
- ✓ **Support.** The support to work through loss, pain, and emotional setbacks, as well as gain a new, healthy perspective on life.
- ✓ **Effective strategies.** Counselling provides you with the opportunity to learn effective strategies for communication, resolving interpersonal conflict, and challenging eating disordered thinking and behaviour.

Counsellors working with people suffering from eating disorders might need to involve medical professionals, dieticians, or even social workers and family members. The reason for this is that the nature of the problem is complex and potentially life-threatening; it is going to need more than the assistance of one counsellor to help you overcome your problems. A counsellor will focus on the emotional component of the problem, helping you understand and deal with your obsessive thoughts about weight, self-image, and self-esteem

Preparing for counselling

It is important not to expect any quick fixes from counselling, but to see it as a 'journey'. Journey's take time. They have ups and downs, steps forward and steps back. Unearthing and confronting deep-seated, negative self-images and beliefs that contribute to the eating disorder is going to be challenging. However, the important thing is that you would have started your journey and you are *not* alone on that journey.

Appendix 1

Table 1: Types of Counselling and Evidence of Effectiveness for Eating Disorders

Type of Counselling	Description	Techniques	Evidence
Behavioural Therapy	Behaviour counsellors believe that all our adaptive and negative actions and disorders are learned. In other words, given the right reinforcements/rewards within a conducive environment, we can 'unlearn' negative behaviours and their accompanying emotional states.	Behavioural techniques are designed to strengthen positive/reinforcing behaviours, such as healthy exercise to bolster self-esteem. The goal is also to provide a healing environment, such as support groups like Rebalance.	Joining and participating in support groups with others in the same situation can be a powerful incentive for making positive changes and maintaining motivation to overcome your eating disorder.
Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT)	A treatment programme that examines how a person thinks, feels and acts, and the events and relationships that underlie these experiences (which are often from childhood). The aim is to help the client gain and understanding of their situation so that they can make changes.	This type of counselling would be tailored to your individual needs, so that manageable goals for change can be set and achieved. It is largely based on the therapeutic relationship and forming a trusting relationship with your counsellor is at the heart of helping you work on your difficulties together.	CAT is increasingly being used to help people with eating disorders, and there is a growing evidence-base for its effectiveness with anorexia and bulimia. Large scale randomised control trials have shown significant improvements in symptoms and well-being.
Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)	Treatment is systematic and deliberate, with clients learning to monitor thoughts and identify accompanying emotions, such as emotions related to food and eating.	You will be encouraged to address beliefs and images about your body shape and size, and how these affect your self-esteem and confidence. In addition, you will learn problem-solving strategies to help prevent relapses.	As an adjunct to other forms of intervention involving doctors and dieticians, CBT has proven effective for people with eating disorders. CBT strategies for relapse prevention have been found particularly effective for recovery maintenance.
Dialectical-Behavioural Therapy (DBT)	Derived from CBT, DBT usually involves clients in group sessions in which they learn new skills, including conflict resolution and effective	You will learn the value of mindful awareness, how to recognise and regulate your emotions, and how to tolerate stress effectively.	DBT has proven effective with people who have bulimia and those who have difficulty managing anger or regulating emotions. Often, the inability to control

	expression.		emotional responses contributes to eating disorders and so learning to regulate emotions can also help with dietary regulation.
Human Givens	A biopsychosocial approach to counselling, with the aim being to identify and address unmet innate needs that are common to all humans (i.e. givens).	You will be helped to discover and address any barriers to meeting your innate needs. Needs you are likely to explore include: security, attention, autonomy, emotional connections, community belonging, friendship, privacy, achievement, and a sense of purpose.	Much more research is needed on this approach for eating disorders. However, there is some evidence that it is effective for helping free people from the rigid patterns of destructive behaviour that maintain the eating disorder cycle.
Integrative/Eclectic Counselling	Many counsellors use a combination of therapeutic approaches to best serve the needs of different clients.	The personality and needs of the client help shape the techniques used by the counsellor. Aspects of client-centred and CBT are often included where appropriate.	This flexible approach has been shown to have high levels of success rates with eating disorders because the style of counselling can be easily adapted to the fluctuating needs and emotional states of the client.
Family Therapy	Family therapy often forms part of counselling individuals with eating disorders.	Family members will be helped to explore how family dynamics might contribute to the eating disorder and how family members can help you overcome it. Families are not blamed, but included.	In general, family members benefit when they get the chance to explore and verbalise their thoughts and feelings in the counselling context. Although challenging, when the purpose of such interaction is to enhance relationships and help families grow, the insights so derived help the person with the eating disorder, as well as those living with the client.
Gestalt Therapy	Gestalt Therapy is designed to help clients experience their emotions in the <i>present</i> , thereby expanding self-awareness.	By focusing on the present as opposed to the past, you will be helped to develop a growing awareness of how your perceptions, thoughts, and emotions influence	Many clients with eating disorders benefit when given the chance to re-live and express blocked emotions within the safety of the counselling room. It

		your current experiences and actions.	can help you make room for new feelings that facilitate rather than hurt your health and well-being.
Person-Centred Counselling (PCC)	PCC's endeavour to create a safe, non-judgemental and accepting environment that will allow you to discover your strengths and weaknesses, and develop your own solutions to problems. PCC's believe in <i>your</i> ability to find the solutions that are best for you.	The focus is on the therapeutic relationship rather than any techniques. Unlike most forms of counselling, the counsellor refrains from asking too many questions or offering advice. Through gentle, thoughtful guidance you learn to empower yourself.	This form of counselling has proven to be highly effective in addressing and resolving the low self-esteem that is often part of an eating disorder. When you begin to become aware of the immense potential lying dormant within yourself, you are empowered to tackle the thoughts and feelings that maintain the illness.
Psychodynamic/ Psychoanalysis	Psychodynamic counsellors use the evolving dynamics of the relationship between yourself and them as an avenue to help you develop insight into your personality, motives, desires, fantasies and actions.	You will learn how even inanimate objects like food can become loaded with significant unconscious symbolic meanings, and how your relationships are influenced by externalised fantasies of which you are normally not aware.	Psychodynamic counselling can be lengthy, and is usually effective after clients have developed enough physical strength to delve into underlying emotions. When you become aware of how your relationship with food serves as a substitute for relationships, you can challenge the behaviours that are keeping you ill.
Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT)	REBT is a form of CBT where counsellors teach clients how to examine thoughts and beliefs, as well as how to discriminate between those that are empowering and those that are negative.	You will learn techniques for disputing irrational, disempowering thoughts and beliefs, and replace these with new, uplifting, logical and empowering ones.	In conjunction with other interventions dealing with the physical aspects of eating disorders, REBT can have powerful effects in stopping or reducing the compulsive aspects of eating disorders. It's an effective way to help you gain control over unhealthy food-related habits.