

Selecting a Counselor

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When deciding on the right counselor for you, the most basic thing to understand is their level of training. Trainings vary within the discipline of Mental Health. More training does not equal better therapy. It is important to understand training levels so that you can select a provider most suitable for your needs. i.e.; you may not need a prescribing (Medical Doctor) if you don't desire medication and would only like to engage in psychotherapy (talk therapy). An important factor in understanding credentials and training is whether or not the provider can assist you in reaching *your* goals. There are many degrees that can be used to provide counseling; here are the more common ones you will find:

- BA or BS: Bachelor's of Arts/Science in psychology: four years of undergraduate studies.
- MA or MS: Masters of Arts/Science in counseling psychology, clinical psychology, educational psychology, etc.: two years of graduate studies after a Bachelor's
- MSC: Master of Science in Counseling
- MFT: Marriage and Family Therapist (study length typically that of a Masters degree)
- LMFT: Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist
- LMHC (LPC): Licensed Mental Health Counselor (Licensed Professional Counselor), typically requires a Masters degree
- MSW: Masters degree in social work (required for advancement to an LCSW)
- LCSW: Licensed Clinical Social Worker
- PsyD: a four-year doctor's degree (a total of eight years of education, may have a Masters degree in addition) that may require the completion of a dissertation and focuses on clinical practice techniques.
- Ph.D: a five-year doctor's degree (a total of nine years of education, may have a Masters degree in addition) requiring the completion of a dissertation, focusing on the understanding and use of clinical theories and therapies, statistics, and research in helping people solve problems.
- Psychiatrist: a medical doctor with additional training in psychotropic medications and the psychological disorders. Usually, they do not provide counseling.

Whatever the degree, a counselor is usually required to have a license to legally practice in a state. Licensing is a means by which the state attempts to protect the patient. Each state keeps record of the counselor's license and any complaints filed by patients against them. You can verify a license and see actions taken by the state against the licensed counselor. To obtain a license, a counselor must have a degree that can be verified by the state and pass a test that asks questions about counseling to the level of their education. Often, licensing exams will have a section on the legal aspects of counseling (such as how to manage patients and records in a way commonly held to be correct). To maintain the license, the counselor must pay a fee every year and avoid having too many (the amount and type vary from state to state) complaints from patients. Since it requires some amount of discipline to obtain and maintain a license, the counselor with one in good standing shows some indication of professionalism.

As a military member or dependent, you have many options to find a counselor: the Mental Health Clinic on your base (if you are a dependent, be sure their policy is to treat dependents, as this varies from base to base), OneSource, Military Family Life Consultant (MFLC), Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF), Chaplain, and Behavioral Health Optimization Program (BHOP). Another good source for help with family-related goals is Family Advocacy, usually co-located with the Mental Health Clinic. MFLC is a civilian counselor that is attached to the Airman and Family Readiness Center (AFRC) or possibly the installation (sometimes directly affiliated with a Group – Ops, Maintenance, Support, etc.), and provides undocumented help to military and dependents. The POTFF is an "imbedded" counselor in your unit (not every unit has one as this is a SOCOM initiative) that provides easily accessible services to members of the unit with little to know command involvement. POTFF sessions can be documented or undocumented and generally focus on short term, solution focused models – assisting with

cognitive and behavioral change strategies. BHOP is a counselor in the MTF that provides rapid solutions to many problems you may bring to your medical doctor. The BHOP provider is positioned in Family Health, and no mental health record is created. The documentation is placed in the outpatient health record and the provider is able to directly consult with your primary care physician (PCM). This allows for decrease in wait times and immediate address to problems that may be associated to the family health visit. OneSource provides twelve sessions per issue per person (dependents included) by a civilian, off-base provider. These sessions are not recorded in the medical record and the counselor has no contact with command. It can be an option to get marital counseling, which is not directly covered by Tricare. Marital counseling is also available through the Mental Health Clinic, Family Advocacy, and perhaps the Chaplains. Network marital counseling can be arranged, but may require consultation through the Mental Health Clinic or your PCM.

If you need to use a Tricare counselor, you should determine what Tricare covers for counseling. As a military member or dependent, you are either "Tricare Prime" or "Tricare Standard." Tricare Prime requires authorization from your Primary Care Physician to use a counselor, whereas Tricare Standard, typically, does not. The first step may be to call Tricare and get a list of providers. If you have a particular counselor in mind, you will want to find out if they are "in network" or "out of network." You may be required to do some different things to use an out of network provider, like gaining authorization from Tricare before seeing them. There is also a limit to the amount of sessions you can use out of network, and there may be a copay if you have Tricare Standard. For military members (but not dependents), any duty-limiting conditions will have to be reported to the MTF. Aside from the chaplain, OneSource is the other exception to this. OneSource will ask a few questions when you call to determine if there are any duty-limiting conditions, and if you answer them in a way that would show duty limitations, they will tell you to use the Mental Health Clinic instead of OneSource.

Duty limiting conditions are really quite rare. To understand how severe a problem would have to be to cause a career problem, consider that, as a rule of thumb, the problem would have to be so severe that it would be dangerous to be in the operational environment with the person because of it. If you are particularly concerned, call or stop by the Mental Health Clinic and ask a provider or technician if a particular problem would affect a person's career negatively.

Even though Tricare, OneSource and all the services found on base are available to you, there may be a situation where paying out of pocket is best (such as to get a particular type of counselor that does not work with Tricare or OneSource). If you are paying out of pocket, you can expect to pay anywhere from about \$60 to \$150 for a session depending on the cost of living where you live and the business model of the counselor. You might expect to pay less per session for counselors who have less years of education, but this is not always the case. Depending on which Tricare you have, you might be able to get reimbursed for some or all of the expense of using one of these providers. This is another question to ask Tricare.

There are several other factors you should consider to determine which will be the best value for your overall treatment. Most counselors have sessions that last 45-50 minutes. Most will have a longer and more costly initial session. Although session cost and length are important factors to determine overall value, the most important measure of value is how quickly your counselor is able to move you towards your goals. Some goals, by their nature and severity, take more effort and time to achieve. Your forthcomingness and dedication to work are very significant factors in treatment length, and therefore, cost.

The competencies of counselors vary greatly, which will likely require you to evaluate several of them. One excellent source of finding a good counselor is to ask your friends and other associates who they recommend. It is likely that some of them have used counselors for themselves or family members and do not typically bring this up in conversation. They will be able to help you understand the characteristics of the counselor they have used. Not every counselor is right for every person, so their experience may not directly relate to you, but they will at least have some good ideas of what to look for and what to look out for. When you are evaluating the counselor, call their office and, if possible, talk to the counselor directly. Assess them as if you are trying to hiring someone to perform critical work on something valuable to you and you want it done right in a reasonable amount of time. You will want to ask them basic questions such as, "do you treat (whatever problem you are trying to overcome)?" "Do you work with people (like me, e.g.: in the military, of a particular belief system, type of culture, age range, education level, etc.)?" "What are your rates?" and "What are your hours?" Although the answers to such questions are important, the way in which they answer them is more important. You will want to find

someone who is confident and comfortable in working with people like you. As they provide these answers to you, you will see that when a competent counselor talks about the characteristics of their patients that are similar to you, they will do so easily and be realistically confident regarding their success in treating them. You will also be able to notice the type of personality the counselor has, and be able to tell if their personality works well with yours.

When you think you have found a good match, schedule an appointment. Just the scheduling will provide an opportunity to assess how well the counselor is organized. If they can get you in quickly and are able to understand and accommodate your schedule, it may show they understand your lifestyle and have the means to meet your needs. When you meet with them, they will be trying to determine what resources you possess to achieve your goals. You should be doing the same. Notice if they are able to understand your situation readily (obviously, you have to be very honest with them: in counseling it is difficult for anyone to know what facts are necessary to solve the problem...do not hold information back from them or you will only delay your growth). Notice if they are flexible in their understanding of problems and are able to switch skillfully from one explanation to another as they determine what is applicable to you. Also notice how they are able to adjust to how you think and see the world. They should adjust their way of working to a way that makes you feel comfortable but challenged. They should also be very focused on achieving your goal, and able to keep you focused on the same. Early on, they should ask you what you want to achieve; watch for them to repeat it back to you, probably with their own insights. Expect them to accept you where you are; if you have an unusual way of looking at the world, expect them to accept that and not try to change your way of thinking (later, if they assess your "world view" keeps you from achieving your goals, they will respectfully challenge it). Also, notice how punctual they are for your appointment, and how organized they are as they treat you. Some counselors take longer than others to complete the initial assessment of you before beginning treatment. Some extend their initial session to accommodate all the information gathering they feel they need to do; others spread it across several sessions. The quicker they can gather what they need and provide you with useful intervention, the faster you can reach your goal. Their interaction with you should be comfortable and respectful, but driven towards achieving your goal; this may be experienced as "painful" or "difficult" but the pain or difficulty should be related to goal achievement. A good counselor is always asking questions or making comments for reasons related to your goal. If at any time you do not understand why a counselor said or asked something, ask them; a good counselor should accept your desire to understand and be able to explain what they are doing. If the counselor you are evaluating does not seem to be moving you to your goal or seems to lack understanding of your situation, you should seek another counselor immediately. Counselors understand that not every person they work with is a good match, and that these people will seek someone more appropriate for them. Stay focused on what you want to achieve and be willing to do what is necessary to meet your goals.