

10 WAYS TO MAKE YOUR COUNSELLING MORE EFFECTIVE

Thanks for downloading this free resource. Here you'll find 10 things you can do outside of counselling to make your counselling more effective and increase your potential for change.

I've put this list together based on things that helped me when I was in my own counselling and things my clients have found useful. When you read through them be aware of your own inner guidance; **if something doesn't speak to you that's fine - move on to something that does**. There's no one-size fits all approach, try a few of them out to see what works. And please don't feel you have to do all of them – mastering just one or two can be enough to get the results you want.

I hope you find this helpful, if you have any questions or feedback you can contact me via my website at <http://www.kirstymcgovern.co.uk>

STEP 1: Commit

How much do you want to change? It must be a lot if you're in counselling (or considering it) but it can be hard to hope for change if you've been dealing with the same problem for a while or you're having longer-term work for problems related to childhood. In this case, **the hope may build slowly but your commitment to change and (to yourself) can always be strengthened**.

For example – do you cancel your sessions because something else comes up (i.e. someone else's agenda)? Sometimes this is unavoidable but it's also rare. So if you find yourself cancelling and re-arranging sessions frequently, take some time to think about how important it is and, if necessary, recommit to yourself. **NB – it can help to write this commitment out on paper and have it somewhere you can see it next time you're tempted to cancel!**

Commitment also covers the time you spend outside of counselling (which is most of the time). Do you reflect after sessions or give each session some

thought before you attend? If not, you may want to start trying this as well as the other steps below.

STEP 2: Get Support

Often client's go to counselling due to difficulties in relationships and it may be there's no-one in your life you can trust with this information. If so, that's fine as counselling can help you build new, healthier relationships. But **often there's someone in your life you could turn to** and at least let them know you're taking these steps (and counselling is a big step).

Clients are reluctant to tell friends or family they're in counselling for two main reasons 1) They don't want that person to worry about them. 2) They're afraid of the stigma of attending counselling (it's still out there but *is* changing). **It can be difficult to tell someone about your counselling but if you don't you're cutting yourself off from a source of support that could really help.** And being in counselling is a pro-active step which can cut down the worry from those who care about you.

If you do decide to tell someone, choose carefully - how well do you know this person and can you trust them to keep your confidence / not judge you? Once you've chosen, be clear about what you'd like from them – do you want them to ask about how it's going? Or would you prefer them not to mention it unless you do? **Generally, people like you to let them know what you want so they can give it to you!**

Having an extra person you can check things out with can be really helpful between sessions and helps you practice communicating over difficult things and receiving support (and most of us could do with practicing that!).

STEP 3: Build your Knowledge

How much do you know about your anxiety, depression, low mood or addiction? Are you actively researching it or are you relying on your

counsellor to tell you everything? Yes your counsellor has the knowledge but you may be spending just an hour a week (or less) with them and you want to maximise that time – **looking things up online, watching videos and reading books will deepen your knowledge and help you feel more in control**. It can also help 'normalise' what you're going through. Reading other people's accounts can give us that "What - you do that too? I thought it was just me" feeling which can help break the isolation. All human beings are different but we also tend to follow similar patterns so you may be surprised.

If you're not sure what to research, or you're not sure what websites to trust, your counsellor can help you with this. They'll probably be pleased by your active interest and it could progress the work more quickly. **Be mindful of your thoughts and feelings while reading the material**, writing them down is a good idea and explore them later with your counsellor. Also, be mindful of feelings of overwhelm and don't research if you're having a low or anxious day. On those days take care of yourself and return to it when you're feeling stronger.

STEP 4: Ask for Homework

Is there anything coming out of your session that you could be thinking about or practicing in between? These don't just have to be the big things (like quitting the addiction or going to social events to overcome social anxiety) in fact, it can be more helpful to start small and build up. **Something as simple as checking in with yourself during the day to improve your awareness of thoughts and feelings** is important work and can be built gradually. If your counsellor doesn't 'set' homework tasks then ask for some – and not at the end of the session when you don't have time to discuss it. Plan ahead and ask at the beginning so you can both be looking out for things that might be suitable.

And please don't feel you have to do homework all the time. There may be times during your counselling where homework isn't suitable – if you're exploring something difficult or are feeling overwhelmed, then forcing yourself to do something could have a negative effect. This isn't about conquering your goals in the fastest time possible, it's about keeping the momentum going and learning when to be active and when to sit back and be kind to yourself.

STEP 5: Exercise

This can be a tricky one - if exercise isn't a part of our lives we can have difficult thoughts and feelings around it – remembering those awful PE lessons where we were forced to do things we hated (which can actually put us off exercise in general). But the physical and psychological benefits are well documented and **it can help us break out of negative thought patterns and shift uncomfortable inner states**. The key here is to choose something you don't hate (and may even come to like) and build it up gradually. And I mean gradually – 5 minutes of running, walking, yoga (or whatever you choose) can get us into a habit and when you're ready, you can increase it. Don't try to do too much – it's about building exercise into our life not pushing everything aside for it. That just creates more overwhelm and won't help you or your change process.

STEP 6: Meditation & Mindfulness

Like exercise, there's growing evidence that meditation can have great physical and psychological benefits which can particularly help if you're in counselling and working on changing something. **Counsellors talk a lot about awareness because you can't change something outside – a habit or pattern of behaviour - without addressing the thoughts and feelings behind it**. So we need to get really good at noticing what we're thinking and feeling in the moment that those thoughts and feelings happen, as that's where change takes place.

And if meditation seems a bit far-out for you and you can't see yourself sitting for minutes let alone hours on a mat – that's fine. Mindfulness is a similar practice you can use in your day to day life; you can practice it absolutely anywhere and in any activity – driving, watching TV, washing up – anywhere your mind might wander. In fact, mindfulness can be a safer alternative to meditation. Some research suggests that meditation can be difficult and

possibly harmful if you've experienced an unresolved traumatic event. There are many resources and free videos online that can help you get into both.

STEP 7: Use your Spiritual faith (or develop it)

Having something to turn to that's bigger than us can really help when we're feeling low, anxious or trying to change our behaviour. If you follow a religion; prayer and contemplation can have similar benefits to meditation and mindfulness, taking it one step further by feeling you're not dealing with life and your problems alone.

If you don't have a religion and are sceptical of the idea of God, that doesn't have to be a barrier to spirituality – **which really means feeling connected to life.** Some people find this by being out in nature or in the company of like-minded people. Whatever works for you could be a great help for you in counselling and in life.

STEP 8: Keep a Diary

In counselling, it can be really hard to keep track of changes unless you record them in some way. Your counsellor can help you do this in the session by noticing differences in you but it can be just as powerful (if not more so) when you notice them yourself. You don't have to write pages (unless you want to) but simply recording your thoughts and feelings can help you to start letting go of them. It can be difficult at first to see them in 'black and white' but, again, it can speed up the change process and get you into the habit of tuning out the outside world and tuning into your inner life.

STEP 9: Enjoy Yourself

This can be harder than it sounds if a) you find it hard to 'let go' and have fun or b) your usual ways of enjoying yourself feel harmful or addictive. But all of us need free time where we enjoy ourselves. Make a list of things you like to do that are good for you (big and small) and take time over this if it feels difficult – perhaps adding to the list over a couple of weeks. Then, schedule in time to do those things and make sure you do them! **It's not bad, wrong or a luxury to enjoy ourselves, in fact it's necessary when we're doing hard work in counselling.** It's a good self-care habit to put into practice.

STEP 10: Be Kind (To You!)

One of the biggest challenges client's have in counselling (whatever their problem) is being as kind to themselves as they would be to others. **Somehow, we've collectively gotten into the pattern of being hard on ourselves, which makes us feel worse and shows a lack of self-trust.** Like the authoritarian parent who assumes the child will be naughty if it's not treated harshly, we send out that same message to ourselves and wonder why our self-esteem is low and / or go through periods of self-sabotage and rebellion.

All good counselling addresses this fundamental element of your relationship with yourself. And like enjoying yourself, being kind to yourself isn't bad, wrong or a luxury. It won't make you a 'bad person' **it'll actually increase your self-esteem and make you happier and more able to reach your goals, which in turn is a benefit to those around you.** So bring your awareness to your thoughts about yourself and commit to turning them round. You get to choose how you view yourself and maybe this is one of the biggest gifts that counselling can give us.