

COUNSELLING IS JUST FOR WIMPS AND NON-JEWS, ISN'T IT?

**This article has been contributed by Ruth Barnett, BSc, UKCP reg BCP reg
Clinical Director of the Raphael Jewish Counselling Service**

Like some people, you may think it is weak and wimpish to go and see a counsellor. Or you may think it is a foolish indulgence and the money should be better spent on some charity for people who really need it. Or perhaps you think someone has to be mad to go for counselling as sane sensible people sort out their own troubles or don't get into them in the first place. In any case, you may be thinking, it is hardly a Jewish 'thing'! Think again.

Most people want to talk to someone when they have something on their mind. Jews particularly like to talk. Not necessarily about something bad or even troublesome. It could be something enjoyable, even exciting, or not quite understood, that can be relived through telling it. The obvious people to seek out to confide in are partners, parents or good friends. But what if you have something to talk about that you fear would make them envious or think you stupid? You may want to keep a good image in your friends' eyes and fear you will lose it if you talk frankly. Gossip is a very Jewish 'thing'. Your family and friends may be somewhat prone to gossip so that you can't be sure they won't pass things you say on to someone else. Counsellors will give you skilled attention without taking up any of your precious time with their own 'stuff'. They are trained to accept you just as you are, to take everything you say seriously and to respect your confidentiality. So what is wimpish or un-Jewish about counselling?

Whenever I am in a Jewish gathering, sooner or later I nearly always find myself listening to someone who just wants to tell me a personal story. As I find people and their stories interesting, I am usually happy to listen. Sometimes I point out their need to be listened to and understood and suggest counselling. That is when I often get told that counselling shows weakness, is really only for wimps and not a Jewish thing to do. Actually counselling needs quite a lot of courage to get started and, once started needs considerable strength and hard work to persist. Many who have experienced it can tell you that it is worthwhile if you make the effort.

I find that a lot of people rubbish counselling because they know, deep down, that they really want it but are scared to let themselves have it. There are a lot of negative stereotypes and myths and these make people feel threatened by even the idea of going for counselling. One of the myths is that a counsellor can look through your eyes into your mind and read what you are thinking. No counsellor can read a client's thoughts though the counsellor may suggest things about the client's story that she/he hadn't been aware of. Another myth is that a counsellor makes you dependent and addicted to continue sessions long after you need them. Some people do come to feel dependent on their counselling but it is more to do with trust than dependency. A lot of people have difficulty trusting and that makes them suspicious of what the counsellor may want to do with them. Counsellors are trained to help people into their therapy at the beginning and to help them to achieve a good ending. Many people have only experienced painful, abrupt unsatisfactory endings with the important people in their lives. For them the ending period can be the most rewarding part of counselling.

A common stereotype of counselling is that the therapist just sits there and says nothing. On the contrary, most counsellors talk quite a lot, but at the same time respect that the session is time set aside for the client to be heard. It will mostly depend on the client's own needs. Some clients want their precious session time to be a quiet respite from the pressures of their outside life, in which there is no pressure to talk until they want to do so. The counsellor's silent presence can be as important as 'mother silently getting on with the ironing' to enable the toddler to play alongside her. Another stereotype is that the counsellor is the expert and teacher who tells you what's wrong and give you a prescription of things to do that will make it all come right. This is a reasonable wish but not the reality. We are used to going to the GP, telling of our symptoms and being given medication and advice. Counselling is more akin to education than medicine. You can't learn in depth without engaging with it and making an effort yourself.

Counselling is an opportunity for those who want to use it. It's not everyone's 'cup of tea' and I would never persuade anybody against his or her inclination to take it on. It doesn't work if a spouse or an employer sends someone. The person has to own that they want it. Then it becomes an opportunity to talk about anything and everything but particularly about the things that feel hard to put into words. We all have things that we hid away in the 'back drawers' of our minds, things we don't like to look at for what they are. And the reason we don't want to face them is that we fear to be judged on them and found wanting. Counsellors listen without judging. They point to different ways of understanding what the client tells about and quite often it turns out that the only person criticising the client is her or himself.

Many people coming to a counsellor the first time feel embarrassed and even foolish because they don't know whether they have a problem. That may be the problem – that they feel confused and out of touch with themselves. Or they may fear that the counsellor won't perceive them as needing or worthy of counselling unless they have some big earth-shattering problem. It's not always helpful to think in terms of problems anyway. Counselling is for anybody who feels he or she is not making the best of themselves and wants to get more out of life by using more of their potential.

Counselling for wimps and non-Jews? Certainly not, it could even be for you!