

Road to Recovery

Establishing trust

How can I find the right counsellor to help me?

Entering into therapy with a counsellor requires a substantial degree of trust and often this takes time to build. Callers to ASCA's 1300 Professional Support Line frequently talk about feeling rejected, judged or poorly listened to by prior therapists. While many survivors eventually settle into a good client-therapist relationship, others can roll from one counsellor to the next, cutting loose after two or three sessions.

There may be several reasons for this. Sometimes counsellors have not had the education and training to enable them to meet the needs of survivors and provide appropriate support. And sometimes developing a safe working alliance means giving the relationship sufficient time to evolve.

When survivors feel as though no one understands them and therefore no one can help, there may, however, be other dynamics at play. These are worth considering.

When you have experienced abuse, it can be difficult to establish unguarded relationships. As a child, you may have been betrayed, manipulated or silenced by other people who were in a position of power and control. Instead of nurturing and protecting you, they trapped you in helpless and dangerous situations. So now, as an adult, other people might be viewed as threatening or as having a hidden agenda.

The whole process of entering into therapy can be particularly triggering. Not only are you obliged to meet with someone you don't know, but the process can involve sharing your most intimate and painful secrets. It can be a matter of getting in touch with your vulnerability, which is not easy for anyone. It can also include revisiting the original trauma. The therapist, meanwhile, sets the time and location of the appointment and shares virtually nothing about their personal life, putting them in an apparent position of power. And all of this is done in a private room, behind closed doors.

Given the similarity between this situation and the abusive environment in which the survivor grew up, it is easy to understand why counselling might be scary. The whole process can set off alarm bells, often at an unconscious level that can't be articulated.

Choosing a therapist who has the appropriate training and experience in working with adult survivors of childhood trauma – such as those on ASCA's **referral database** – can be an important first step in an effective therapeutic process. A good counsellor will be attuned to a survivor's hesitations and vigilance, and work to ameliorate the power imbalance by encouraging openness and cooperation.

Both you and the counsellor have rights and responsibilities. You have the right to feel listened to and understood, to have your thoughts and feelings validated, and your strengths and choices acknowledged. The counsellor's responsibilities are to be non-judgmental, empathic and warm, to be reliable with appointment setting, and to have the professional competence to draw on different methods that respond to the client's needs. By the same token, it is best for the client to be as open as they can to enable the counsellor to see the full picture. This can take time. Both parties need to respect the boundaries that keep the relationship safe.

It is the counsellor's responsibility to set these boundaries. This might include explaining how appointments are made and what happens if a client cancels, the fees which are charged and methods of payment, and whether notes will be taken during a session. Importantly, these



boundaries preclude any form of social relationship and set clear rules around emergency contact outside of scheduled sessions.

Survivors are often tempted to overstep these boundaries by asking for longer sessions, insisting on frequent phone contact or wanting to be 'friended' on Facebook. Others might withdraw by failing to show up for an appointment or refusing to pay on time. All of these actions are a subconscious way of checking on a therapist's availability, to see if they care, or to test whether they are going to disappear and leave the client alone with their pain, so replicating childhood experiences.

Survivors can misinterpret a counsellor's attempt to maintain boundaries as being controlling or hard-hearted. In reality, the therapist may be working to model a respectful adult relationship which keeps both parties safe. Remember, as a child, you were confused and threatened by the unpredictable and inconsistent actions of caregivers. Thus it is not helpful for a therapist to mirror these behaviours.

The process of building trust can take weeks, even months, as the relationship is repeatedly tested, disrupted and repaired. An experienced trauma counsellor will have the capacity to tolerate these ups and downs, and the patience to go at your pace. They should also welcome feedback, and listen to your thoughts on what might be affecting your ability to connect.

Only in a collaborative and respectful relationship, where both parties are equally committed to creating new connections, can the real work of trauma recovery begin.