

Sick about going to counseling ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am scared to seek counseling. The papers are on my desk for me to turn in to the counseling center. But, something is holding me back; I'm not sure what. Do you have any suggestion as to how I can make the final step? There is something about getting past that initial first step that scares me to the point of nausea.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Fear not! It's not unusual for people to feel uncomfortable or scared about counseling. It might feel especially distressing when something you fear is the very thing that might help you feel better. There are lots of reasons people may feel a little nervous. Some might be afraid of opening up to a stranger. Others might feel that only "crazy" people go for therapy or that their issues need to be earth-shattering to justify seeking professional help. Still others might have grown up in a culture that shames people who see a counselor. Some fear that going to counseling will make their problems more "real" — that they'll be forced to look them in the face — which can be very frightening. Do any of these reasons resonate with you? While it's perfectly normal to experience fear, there are things you can try to overcome it! Recognizing and naming your fear is often the first step to finding a solution. A little reflection on why you feel fearful and a little preparation for what to expect during a session might go a long way in getting you to walk through those doors.

People meet with a counselor for all sorts of reasons. Some are there to talk through tough decisions, to learn how to help a friend in need, to gain the perspective of an objective ear, or to cope with a difficult experience. Of course, there are also people who are seeking treatment of mental health conditions, like anxiety, behavioral challenges, or eating disorders. No matter what your reasons, chances are that by taking that leap, you'll get connected with resources and support to help you overcome whatever challenges you're facing.

Perhaps hearing a little bit about the potential benefits of counseling can allay some of your fears. One of the reasons some people like counseling is the opportunity to have someone listen to you and only you without distractions and interruptions. But, if the thought of having to talk

about yourself makes you feel even more anxious, consider these other possible benefits:

- **A gossip and judgment-free space:** Counselors abide by strict confidentiality guidelines (unlike even your best-intentioned friends and family). Your specific counselor can give you more details on the confidentiality policy, but you certainly don't have to worry about everyone and their mother hearing about what you're going through.
- **Academic or job support:** Mental health is just as vital as physical health when it comes to managing your everyday life. A counselor may be able to connect you with additional resources and skills training — like time management resources, social skills training, or relaxation exercises — that might help enormously in improving your ability to manage school, work, or other day-to-day tasks that might be affected by your mental health.
- **An opportunity for self-respect:** Seeking help is a sign of strength. Everyone needs support from time to time, and considering counseling can be a sign that you value and prioritize your well-being.

If you have other concerns about using your counseling center's services, a call to the office, a quick visit to a drop in location, or a review of their website might also help ease your mind. If you're not even sure where to start, consider reading [Types of therapists](#) [2] in the *Go Ask Alice!* archives for a quick guide on what different types of therapy have to offer. Also, remember that your counselor is there to help **you!** If you don't "click" with the first counselor you try, it's totally your decision to [try someone new](#) [3]. You can also always be honest with your provider if you don't want to talk about a certain topic. It's your health and your brain, after all!

If you still find that the thought of heading to a counseling center sends you running to the bathroom or has you sweating bullets, here are a few practical steps you can consider for easing yourself into that first session:

- Asking a trusted friend to come along and wait for you in the waiting room.
- Bringing along a favorite book or magazine to read while you wait for your appointment.
- Planning a nice meal, outing with friends, or another "reward" for after your session.
- Scheduling your appointment for a day and time when you will have plenty of time to relax before and after. You might even want to try some [simple relaxation or breathing techniques](#) [4] to ease your queasy stomach.
- Telling your therapist during the first session about your fear and nerves about the session. That way, s/he can help you work through those feelings.

Counseling is kind of like a workout for your brain to help keep it in good shape. It's healthy and normal to stretch and exercise the heart, lungs, and other muscles — why not do the same for your thoughts and feelings? After taking that first step through the counselor's door, you might find that the fear is replaced by a sense of relief and comfort. Remember: you and your health are always worth the effort.

Alice!

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