

Primary Care Counselling Service



Referral Guidelines

Counsellors will receive referrals from the GPs in the practice(s) in which they are based. The Department of Health has produced guidelines¹ as to the broad types of patients that should be referred to counselling and psychological therapy services in primary care:

- Mild, stress-related problems, adjustment to life events, illnesses, disabilities or losses are appropriate for treatment in primary care;
- Generic counselling is not recommended as the main intervention for severe and complex mental health problems or personality disorders.
- The guidelines do not make specific recommendations about the types of patients who are best treated in primary care (as opposed to those who are best referred to secondary care) as there is a lack of high quality evidence on this issue, and appropriateness depends in part on the levels of skill, support and supervision available in each setting.
- General principles are suggested e.g. referral out of primary care (to CMHT) is appropriate for patients with a history of severe trauma, previous unsuccessful treatment in primary care, and patients with complex social problems, severe depression, anxiety or co-morbidity.
- In the absence of local secondary care psychotherapy services more complex client work may need to be carried out in the primary care setting. In such circumstances the GP will need to take into account the individual training and experience of the counsellor they wish to refer to.

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and Counsellors and Psychotherapists in Primary Care (CPC) have also produced guidelines², which are concerned with the types of patients who may benefit from counselling in primary care. Suitable patients need to meet the following criteria, and assessment would be required in all cases:

1. Their problems affect their ability to cope with daily life, or the quality of their life and relationships.
2. Their problems are causing current distress.

Indications of whether they will be able to use counselling effectively are:

1. Able to engage in conversation and willing to disclose personal information.
2. Capacity for reflection and some motivation for change.
3. Willingness and ability to make a regular commitment to attend appointments.

Patients amenable.../

Patients amenable to counselling or psychological therapy in primary care are likely to be those in the following categories:

- Pathological bereavement
- Coping with injury or illness
- Depression - reactive, circumstantial
- Developmental or life crises
- Appropriate emotional, physical or sexual abuse issues
- Family relationship issues
- General anxieties and phobias
- Lack of direction, alienation, existential problems
- Loss e.g. relationship, employment, health etc
- Self-image and identity issues
- Stress and trauma (pre- and post-event)
- Issues of sexuality

It is important to note that not all patients may be suitable for counselling or psychological therapy in primary care. The counsellor has a duty not to counsel a patient if they consider that he/she is unsuited. In such cases the patient will be referred back to the GP.

The following conditions may not be suitable for primary care counselling, unless the counsellor has specific, relevant skills and/or is supported by the CMHT and primary care colleagues:

- Sexual dysfunction
- Poor communication ability
- Self-destructive behaviour which, over time, has shown very little change, i.e. prolonged substance misuse, eating disorders
- Severe mental disorders
- Severe challenging behaviours, i.e. aggression, violence, severe learning disabilities

In summary, the key criteria for referral are the patient's ability to change and their ego strength. The very fragile may well find counselling too challenging. Those who have too much invested in remaining the same may also find counselling too challenging.

The counsellor may well, after assessment, re-REFER the patient as "inappropriate for counselling"; suggest a referral to the CMHT or, if appropriate, some other agency (e.g. Cruse for the recently bereaved).

¹ Department of Health. *Treatment Choice in Psychological Therapies and Counselling: Evidence based clinical practice guideline*. London. Department of Health, 2001.

² Counsellors and Psychotherapists in Primary Care (CPC). *Professional Counselling and Psychotherapy – Guidelines and Protocols*. Bognor Regis. CPC, 2000.