Need to Know Series:

Counseling: What's the Scoop?

Youth In Progress

New York State Foster Care
Youth Leadership Advisory Team

"The mission of Youth In Progress is to enhance and advance the lives of today's and tomorrow's youth by supporting their sense of self and responsibility. To do this, we pledge to educate everyone involved in the various systems Youth In Progress members represent to the realities of this experience."

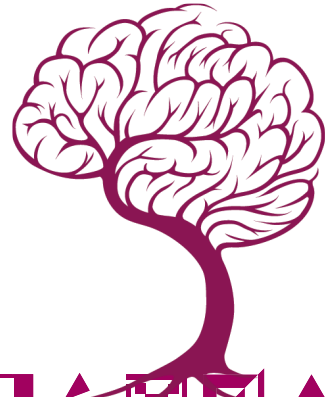
Being healthy on the inside is as important as being healthy on the outside. Being mentally healthy can assist you on your path to a happy and successful life. This pamphlet will help you better understand the counseling services that are available to youth in care and their families, and what forms those services may take.

"All youth in foster care should expect to have a mental health assessment (within 30 days of entering care), and receive mental health services if needed. An appointment should be made with a mental health provider (psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker) who will ask if you are depressed, confused, or need help adjusting to foster care."

– Foster Care Youth Handbook:
www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/publications/Pub5028.pdf

A Mental Health Assessment gives your doctor an overall picture of how well you feel emotionally and how well you are able to think, reason, and remember (cognitive functioning). Your doctor will ask you questions and examine you. You might answer some of the doctor's questions in writing. Your doctor will pay attention to how you look and your mood, behavior, thinking, reasoning, memory, and ability to express yourself. Your doctor will also ask questions about how you get along with other people, including your biological family, foster family, unit mates / group home mates, classmates, and friends. Sometimes the assessment includes lab tests, such as blood or urine tests.
– WebMD

You may feel anxious about meeting with a counselor for the first time. Feeling anxious is normal; whatever the reason for coming into care, knowing what to expect may help. It's understandable that you may be hesitant to share your personal information with this person you do not know. Understanding the counselor's role and why counseling is important during your transition into care, throughout your stay in care, and during your transition out of care can be helpful.



What is counseling and why is it important?

There are 3 primary types of counseling: **individual, family,** and **group.** Counseling is a process through which the counselor helps you understand your feelings and the problems you may be having. A counselor or therapist is objective and will help guide you through learning to problem solve, find solutions, set goals, and make good life choices. Counseling serves many purposes and can help you to feel less anxious, stressed, angry, or depressed. Working with a counselor can help you better cope with challenges, fears, concerns, or crises that may come up.

Counseling can help you begin to make some of the changes you want.

> *"It wasn't my fault I couldn't control myself. My counselor helped me get on the right medication and wrote a note to my teachers so they would know why I had been acting out in school. Now I am doing so much better in school and at home."*
>
> *– Youth in care*

What kinds of questions is the counselor going to ask me?

The first step of the process typically involves a thorough evaluation of your concerns and life history. Your counselor will also ask about the problems that brought you to care, if you have a history of past and present emotional and psychological concerns, about any medical issues and medications you are taking, and if you use drugs or used them in the past. Your counselor may also ask about your family and social history. After gathering this information, you and your counselor will design a plan for your counseling and establish realistic goals.

More information can be found in: *A Medical Guide for Youth in Foster Care*
www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/publications/Pub5116BOOKLET.pdf (English)
www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/publications/Pub5116(S)BOOKLET.pdf (Spanish)

Privacy is important.

You may tell a counselor things you have not talked about before and that you may not want others to know. Be sure to spend some time talking with your counselor about how he or she will protect your safety and confidentiality. You need to trust that your counselor respects your privacy so you can talk freely. Your counselor must respect your privacy, but also is required by law to report certain things, such as:

- Abuse that has or is happening to you
- A serious threat you made to harm yourself
- A serious threat you made to harm someone else

What should I do to prepare for counseling?

Counseling is a team effort. Your counselor really wants to work with you to help you solve your problems. Your counselor is not going to tell you what to do; rather, he or she will help you to come up with solutions. Here are some things you can do to make your counseling sessions as successful as possible:

- **Be open.** Counselors are trained to ask the right questions, but they are not mind readers. The counselor can do his or her job more effectively if you are open and honest in your conversations.
- **Be prepared.** Before you get to the session, know how to describe "what's going on" and to describe your feelings about your problem or concern. One way to prepare is to write down the reasons you want to talk with a counselor or why you think counseling was recommended. Maybe you want to talk about why you were placed in care, or about a family issue, or feelings that are making you sad or depressed. Make a list and then read it out loud. Hearing yourself say it a few times will help you describe things more clearly to the counselor.

- **Ask questions.** The more you understand the counseling experience and how counseling works, the more comfortable you'll be. Ask questions about the counseling process, and ask the counselor to repeat anything that you don't understand.
- **Be honest about your feelings.** A lot will be going through your head during counseling sessions. Be aware of your own reactions and feelings, and share them with the counselor. You'll both learn from these insights.

Be sure to go to your counseling sessions with realistic expectations. Counseling is not a quick fix for your problems; it can take time. With some effort on your part, and a strong relationship with your counselor, it can be a successful tool toward resolving problems.

What are the different types of counseling?

There are several types of counseling that you may take part in. Your counseling program will be designed to address your specific needs. Here are a few examples of different kinds of counseling:

Individual Counseling. Individual counseling is a direct, active, and personal approach that helps you to increase your individual self-awareness, understanding, and overall well-being. Individual counseling can help you identify the most effective ways for you to personally achieve your desired goals for this stage in your life, as well as provide you with the tools to cope with difficult circumstances that may arise along the way.

Family Counseling. Families often face challenges that require a different type of counseling. A family counselor is trained in the types of family dynamics that can occur and how they can affect each individual family member. Family members can then learn how to work, live, and love together in a more positive way.

Group Counseling. In group counseling, a single counselor works with multiple youth in order to help them resolve troubling issues. Group counseling can be effective for youth who are not comfortable in a one-on-one setting. This type of counseling also provides the opportunity to learn from your peers by sharing experiences and challenges.

Counseling can also have a specific focus. It could focus on alcohol and/or drug problems. A substance abuse counselor, trained in understanding and treating alcohol and drug use, may work with you to help you learn how to manage problems without using substances. You may need mental health counseling. There are many reasons you may need to see a mental health counselor, like if you have a chemical imbalance, serious family issues, or experienced some kind of trauma that makes it difficult for you to do what you need to do each day. Mental health counseling can be of help.

"Sometimes I didn't want to talk, so my counselor told me to write instead. After she read it back to me, I felt more comfortable and it was easier to talk to her."

– Youth in care

Are there different kinds of counselors?

Yes. Here are some examples of the different types of counselors:

Psychiatrist. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who is specialized in the treatment of emotional illnesses. A psychiatrist can offer counseling services and is the only one on this list that can prescribe medications.

Psychologist. A psychologist is a person who has earned a doctorate in psychology. Psychologists can diagnose mental and emotional health problems and can offer counseling services. Psychologists often provide educational assessments by performing standardized testing or testing for learning disabilities.

> *"I thought if I talked to the counselor they would think that I was crazy, but they didn't. They told me that my life was hard and unfair sometimes. I actually felt they cared and understood why I had problems at home."*
>
> *– Youth in care*

Clinical Social Worker. A clinical social worker is a social worker who has earned a master's degree and who has been trained in making mental health diagnoses and offering counseling services.

Drug and Alcohol Counselors. Drug and alcohol counselors have received additional specialized training in addiction counseling. Addictions counselors can diagnose addiction problems and can offer individual, group, and family therapy.

Family Counselor. A family counselor usually has at least a master's degree in counseling or a related field and has received specialized training in family counseling.

Licensed Professional Counselors (also sometimes known as Licensed Mental Health Counselors or Licensed Clinical Counselors). These types of counselors have earned at least a master's degree or higher in a counseling field. These counselors are able to diagnose and treat mental illness and emotional and behavioral health problems.

Does it really work?

Research has shown that counseling works when a trusting, positive relationship is built between you and your counselor. Your counselor may challenge you at times or even disagree with you; however, you should feel that they have your best interests at heart.

> *"Going to counseling while I was in foster care really helped pinpoint the things that make me angry. Now that I am out of care, I am not afraid of those triggers because I know my counselor gave me the tools to get through the hard times."*
>
> *– Youth in care*

We hope you found this pamphlet helpful. If you have further questions, feel free to ask your caseworker or visit:

www.omh.ny.gov/omhweb/childservice/

Images used under license from Shutterstock.com

This material was developed by the

Professional Development Program,
Rockefeller College, University at Albany,
through **The Research Foundation of State University of New York,**

under a training and administrative services agreement with the

New York State Office of Children and Family Services.

Copyright © 2014 by The New York State Office of Children and Family Services.

Pub. 5125 (Rev. 5/14)