

# Unexpected Counsellor



Anyone can become an 'unexpected' or 'accidental' counsellor.

An unexpected counsellor is someone who may not be trained to provide counselling, but can still helpfully and safely support someone in distress or experiencing a crisis. Being able to safely and effectively support friends, family, colleagues, and strangers is a key part of creating belonging, and can be a useful skill for us all to learn.

This includes being comfortable about having difficult discussions, and also knowing your limits in being a source of support. While you may not be able to solve another person's problems, listening, reassuring and respecting someone when they disclose something can help them to feel safe. Once they feel safe, they may feel supported to take the next steps in finding qualified help.

## Listen

Be present when they are talking to you. Sometimes moving the conversation to a private area can be necessary. Try not to interrupt or look at your phone. You can help someone feel heard by acknowledging what they have said with non-verbal cues. This could include inclining your head slightly, nodding, facing them with open arms (not crossed) and making regular eye contact. Try to listen without judgement and ask clarifying questions if you need to.

Manage your own reactions. It is important to stay calm and try not to let your own opinions about the issue play a role in how you understand their experience. Focus on how the person feels, rather than 'solving' the issue they have presented. Remember that your mental and emotional state can influence how you respond. If you find yourself feeling triggered by the disclosure, seek help for yourself as well – more on this later.

## Reassure

Once the person has said everything they would like to say, it's important to express empathy for their situation. Avoid telling them about your (or others') similar experiences. Instead, confirm and validate their emotions. You might tell them their

responses are normal and that it's okay to feel how they are feeling. Understand that they may experience shame or embarrassment, so thanking them for sharing can be helpful. However, try not to make assumptions about how they are feeling, or what action they might wish to take. Statements like 'you must feel very sad/angry/annoyed' might not reflect their experience. For example, in some situations, they may still be in touch with the person who caused the harm.

## Specific things to consider for individual issues

- Some issues take time. If someone is grieving, upset about past events or struggling longer term with a break-up, encouraging them to "move on" or telling them "you should be over it by now" isn't helpful. Validating that for them it is still an issue and encouraging professional support to work through complex matters, is more valuable.
- For survivors of abuse, it's important to let them know it is/was not their fault and help is available. It's also important not to pressure them to report it but provide support if they choose to. In the case of domestic

violence, the decision to leave the situation can be complex. Resources such as 1800RESPECT can assist. For those experiencing elder abuse, it's important to note that this is not a regular family dynamic. In the case of child abuse, please refer to the [Australian Institute of Family Studies' information](#).

- If discussing an eating disorder, avoid mentioning weight or appearance. If they haven't disclosed a diagnosis, don't attempt to diagnose them.
- Understand that self-harm and suicide are very stigmatised. Don't classify these topics as normal/right/wrong.
- In the case of racial discrimination or a hate crime, acknowledging that that behaviour was unacceptable is important especially if they are sharing with someone from a different racial background. Reassure them that nobody deserves that treatment and name it for what it is. Remind them that hate-crimes are illegal and that there is no shame in bringing it to the police, if they choose to.

## Respect

Respect the other person's autonomy. Often, the distressing event is coupled with a loss of autonomy, so it's vital to support the person to find options that work for them, allowing them to feel in control and confident about their decisions.

If a crime has been committed, do not pressure them to report the crime if they are uncomfortable with it. Ultimately, it is their choice. Provide them with resources but allow them to make the choice on what they decide to do. Remember, sometimes a person might believe themselves to be unsafe to seek help.

Respect yourself. Focus on supporting rather than rescuing. Understand that there is a limit to how much you can help someone, and that is ok. Think about your relationship to them and assess how you can best support them. Why did they disclose to you? Perhaps you were trusted with this information because you sit outside their family dynamic. As a neighbour or more peripheral supporter, you might be able to help them identify a safe support network and establish a plan of action. As a close friend or family member, you may be in a position to support them with booking appointments and checking in regularly.

Don't feel compelled to keep secrets that are unfair, such as a threat of self-harm. Instead talk openly with the

person about this being an unfair request out of your concern for the situation and come up with an alternative together.

## Check in

Check in with them. Follow up this conversation at a later date and see how they are doing. Once you have both had time to process you may find you have different ways of approaching the conversation.

Check in on yourself. You can only support someone else if you feel supported yourself. Set a time to self-reflect and practice self-care. When you're ready, use your own support network. Debrief with a loved one or a trusted professional. This can be a great way to discuss what went well and what didn't in a safe and supportive space.

## Next steps

If there is any immediate chance of harm to the person or anyone else, call 000.

For non-emergency situations, there are a variety of resources you can access here. These include issue-specific hotlines, websites and other tools for responding.

**For more information on our services and how they can support you, or to find your nearest centre:**

**Call 1300 364 277**

**Visit**

[www.relationships.org.au](http://www.relationships.org.au)