5 Things You May Want to Know Before Coming to Counseling

By Tina Yang, Ph.D.

Reaching out for help can sometimes be uncomfortable and scary as you don’t know how others might respond or the outcome of it. As a mental health professional, I admire people who find courage, despite life’s difficulties, to come to counseling as the first step toward making a change in their life. To help untangle your uneasiness in seeking professional assistance, here are a few things you may want to know about counseling.

If you feel nervous about coming to counseling, you are not alone. Sharing your personal struggles can cause you to feel vulnerable as it takes a great deal of emotional and mental energy. Counseling is a safe and confidential place where you can explore concerns and find a path to personal growth. If anxious feelings arise, notice and acknowledge them, and let it be a motivating factor for you to seek help and find some relief.

Positive change can occur in counseling, but it doesn’t happen overnight. As much as I wish to have a magic wand to wave away your emotional pain, counseling doesn’t work that way. Contrary to popular belief, counseling is not advice giving, nor it is the same as talking with family or friends. It is an honest journey of taking a closer look when you feel stuck and finding your strengths and resilience that you might have overlooked. Counseling can help you learn new “tools” or re-use old ones in a different way to help you move forward. In this process, sometimes it is common to feel worse before feeling better again. Be patient and compassionate with yourself. If you feel like you have obtained some relief, learned something about yourself, or gained a new skill from a session, you have made progress.

Believe it or not, you are the expert of yourself! While we as mental health professionals are competent at what we do, you are the one who knows yourself the most. Counseling requires team work. That way you can make the most out of it. Your honesty, open-mindedness, curiosity about self, and willingness to explore and experiment different ways of being, are a few approaches that enhance your counseling experience.

Begin your healing journey with a goal in mind. As with anything we do, it is easily to feel lost without a goal in mind. It is the same way with counseling. Your goals can be specific or you may just have a sense of what you want to work on. Your counselor can help you develop goals that are reasonable and attainable.

Work through negative emotions in counseling even when it is hard. At times, you may choose to skip a counseling session when you feel too depressed, anxious, sad, angry, or frustrated. Your mind may try to trick you by telling yourself why not going to counseling would be a better idea. However, it’s during this time that you need support the most. There is no better place than in counseling to explore, understand, and feel supported with the feelings you share. Stay with it! Things will get better if you give it a chance. It’s about progress, not perfection.

Last but not least, be proud of yourself for taking care of your mental health needs!

Ideas or questions for the Counseling Corner? Call (903) 886-5145 or stop by the Counseling Center in Halladay Student Services Bldg, Rm #204. Previous articles can be found on the Counseling Center web site.