

*Counselor's Toolbox*

## What Does a Good First Session Look Like?



by LAUREN WHITMAN

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People and problems come in all shapes and sizes—so there is no one-size-fits-all approach to counseling. Similarly, no one approach always applies for the first time you sit down with someone to offer help. Even so, there are ways you can be ready to conduct a first session so that it proves to be a productive time. What are those ways? How can you best ensure that a person leaves that first meeting with you feeling hopeful about the help that can come from a fruitful counseling relationship?

This article will explore these questions. It is written from the vantage point of my service at a Christian counseling center. But my hope is that what I share will also be helpful for a pastoral counseling session in a church, for when another church member requests to talk over coffee, and even for an honest, personal conversation after small group.

I will discuss components that could be a part of a typical first meeting with an individual adult.<sup>1</sup> But this is not a how-to guide or a step-by-step manual. The components I will discuss are not all present every time. Variations occur for many reasons. Who is the individual in front of you? Why has this person come to counseling? How much time do you have to meet? Where does the conversation naturally go? Each of these has impact on the direction of a first session.

Before we explore how a first session might unfold, let's first think about the mindset we want to have as counselors as we begin one.

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<sup>1</sup> Because counseling children is so different from counseling with adults, it is worth its own article about how to approach a first session with a child or teen. Similarly, a first meeting with a couple brings a

### The Counselor's Mindset

You might think that a counselor isn't responsible for *doing* much in a first session. After all, you don't know this person yet, and you have a lot of listening to do. Isn't the first meeting the one time you can sit back and just get to know another person? Well, there is certainly a lot of listening ahead, but we will be more effective and loving helpers if we approach a first session with intentional-

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ity. What we do (or don't do) affects the future of this counseling relationship that is just coming into existence. This intentional mindset helps me be a better friend. But I'm also seeking to be a *Christian* friend. So, I want all that I do and say as a counselor to be rooted in this reality: God intends for me (and for you!) to embody who he is, especially in living out the call to love one another well and wisely. My awareness of the following realities helps me to do that faithfully.

**Something hurts.** People don't come to counseling to talk about things that are going well. Something isn't working. Something is hard. If I hold in mind that something hurts, then my fundamental posture toward this person will be one of compassion (Col 3:12).

**Pursuing counseling is not fun or easy.** Who wants to go to counseling? Not many of us. Who wants to divulge sensitive and private information to someone we may have just met? Again—not many of us. If you have ever pursued counseling for yourself, you know that it is not an easy endeavor. Pursuing growth is difficult. You must be willing to admit that you have problems. Something is broken, and it requires humility to open up to someone and ask for help. You must be willing to hear and receive feedback, which requires the humility of listening. You must be willing to consider that feedback and implement changes in your life—how you think, act and react—which requires commitment and faith. You must be willing to put in time and effort and maybe even money, which requires sacrifice. So it is no small thing when someone decides to pursue counseling, works out all of the scheduling details, and finally sits down to meet for the first time.

I try to put myself in the other person's shoes. As I remember that this person has made a choice to do something that I know is not easy, then I will look for ways to honor that choice by doing all I can to make the time helpful for the counselee (1 Thess 5:11).

**I do not yet know this person.** I want to know this person. This is an individual with unique experiences. I have never heard this particular story. I want to build reasons for trust. Therefore, I go in humbly and ready to give my full attention. I am earnest to understand, earnest to listen, earnest to connect (Rom 12:9a, Prov 18:4).

Likewise, this person does not yet know me. I want this person to begin to know me. I want to be myself. I will avoid putting on a counselor persona. I want the person to experience me as I always am, no matter what context I am in.

**I want the counsel seeker to leave feeling hopeful and encouraged because something truly good has begun.** Obviously a first session does not afford the time to comprehensively address problems. But a good first session should leave the person feeling hopeful and encouraged that he or she can be helped and that counseling may be one effective way to bring about change and growth (Prov 15:22). This is a reasonable goal for a first session. Therefore, I will be on the lookout for ways to bring hope and encouragement throughout the conversation. And I will likely offer specific and explicit encouragement toward the end of the session. I'll share an example of that later in the article.

Now let's move on to how a first session might unfold.

### An Example of How to Structure a First Session

In this example, I will present one way a first session could chronologically unfold. Here is an outline of this hypothetical first session.

- Discuss "preliminaries"
- The person shares his or her story as it relates to the decision to pursue counseling
- Find out about the person's past experiences with counseling
- Identify the person's goals for counseling
- Collaborate briefly about where to begin the second session
- Offer encouragement
- Allow a final opportunity for the person to ask any questions about the counseling process
- Close in prayer

Let's look more deeply at each of these.

**Review and discuss preliminaries.** After greeting the counselee and intro-

ducing myself,<sup>2</sup> I discuss logistics first. In a professional setting, the counselee will have read and signed a number of forms by the start of the first session. These forms generally contain important legal information about privacy rights as well as information about the counseling center's policies. It is important that the counselee understands this information. You care well for this person by ensuring that he or she does understand. So I offer an opportunity for the person to ask questions. "Do you have any questions? I'll be asking you quite a few questions today, but this is a two-way street." If there are no questions, I review the basics of what situations warrant the breaking of counselor confidentiality—just to be clear. Since people tend to skim over forms, be sure to highlight whatever you want the counselee to be aware of. For example, you may wish to go over details like the cancellation policy or how the person can get in contact with you between sessions if need be. It can be helpful, too, if the counselor explicitly shares how long a session runs, so that it does not come as a surprise when the counselor later transitions to closing the session.

It is tempting to skip over reviewing such matters because what you really want to do is start getting to know this person, but let me encourage you to not skip this conversation. It is a way to love the person. If the counselee has clarity about the logistical and practical matters of counseling, then it can prevent future misunderstandings and frustrations for both of you.

***Draw out and hear the person's story.*** I am going to spend the most time here because this is where the bulk of the time in a first session is usually spent. Not only that, but it is here that you have the most opportunity to make a meaningful connection with the person. This connection lays a solid foundation for your relationship. It gives the person good reasons to come back and meet with you again.

Once the preliminaries have been discussed, the first major turning point in the conversation takes place. You move toward talking about deeper matters. I start by asking a question or making a statement that invites the person to start to share. For example, "Can you share with me why you have decided to pursue counseling? And if it's ok, I might ask you some questions as you are talking, as well as take a few notes." (The second sentence helps the person know what to expect as he or she begins to talk.)

As you "hear the person's story," be an engaged listener. You are seeking to know another human being. You will learn details about this person's life, about

<sup>2</sup> If you are an intern counselor, mention the supervisor you are working with. People may have reservations about working with a young counselor, so it can be helpful for them to know that you are working closely with an experienced counselor.

struggles, about hopes and disappointments. You will learn about the person's relationship with the Lord and where God fits in relation to the struggles. Getting to know someone is not done in an impersonal or passive way! So how can you be involved and active as the person shares about the reasons for pursuing a counseling relationship? I will list six skills. Many of these are important to any session—whether it's the first or the thirtieth. But in a first session, these are the initial ways that you demonstrate that you are seeking to listen, to understand, and to care well.

1. Periodically offer reflections and summaries. You want to be sure that you are accurately hearing what is being shared with you. So periodically check in by summarizing what you are hearing. This gives the counselee the opportunity to correct, clarify, or confirm your understanding of what has been shared. Your counselee is reading you, too, to see if you are tuned in to what is being said.

Here is an example of a counselee sharing and a counselor summarizing and offering a reflection.

Counselee: "Lately I have just felt like I'm drifting through life, and I'm not sure what my purpose is. I used to have so much motivation and so many clear goals for my life. But after I was let go from the job that I loved, I just feel like every day is a battle to feel normal. And even though God has blessed me and provided for me since, I just haven't gotten back to that place where I feel the hope that I once had. I want to feel the way that I used to. I miss approaching life with a fundamental joy and optimism."

Counselor: "So you lost a job you loved, and you feel directionless and adrift?"

Counselee: "Yes, it was a *devastating* loss."

Counselor: "I'm so sorry that this has been so hard. It makes me really sad to hear how much pain this has caused you. (Silence) And since then, you've seen changes in yourself... and it's bothering you. The spark is gone. You want to regain the approach to life that you once had? And you want help because you're not sure how to do that?"<sup>3</sup>

Notice that I used some of the counselee's same words, but by putting my understanding in my words, it gives the counselee the opportunity to see if I have accurately captured what he or she meant. A summary captures content (loss of job and optimism), the person's emotion (discouragement, listlessness), and the

<sup>3</sup> A summary could also end with a question that moves the conversation forward to further your understanding, e.g., "How have you tried to deal with this loss of life?"

direction the person wants to go (regain joy and optimism).

These skills, done well, sound vivid, not canned. If you are engaged, if you are listening to understand, if you are reaching to understand better, then your summary goes a little deeper and elaborates on what has been put on the table so far. A good summary will generate real confidence in the counselee and a sense that the counselor “gets me.” A good summary invites the person to take the next step.

Notice, too, that the personal response/reflection I shared (“I’m so sorry that this has been so hard. It makes me really sad to hear how much pain this has caused you.”) put me into the struggle. Share the ways you are moved by a person’s story. Open-hearted kindness and concern for another’s troubles are characteristics of Jesus.

2. Begin to understand the person’s goals by clarifying how the person wants to use future counseling times. Often as a person shares the immediate reasons for pursuing counseling, surrounding and peripheral issues will come up. You need to check in to see if the counselee would like to explore these. For example, if a woman has come to address issues of intimacy in her marriage, but in her sharing she mentions how she has sometimes wondered what impact her parent’s divorce has had on her own marriage, I might ask, “Is that also something that you’d like to explore here in counseling?” In doing this, I am seeking to understand how our times together can be most helpful to her. It is easy to be curious and ask more about things that seem important, but I want to know what she views as important and relevant to the growth that she desires. These clarifications are something I will keep track of for when we move to a more focused discussion of counseling goals.

3. Freely express all the non-verbal ways that demonstrate that you’re listening and engaged. Look at the person. Make eye-contact. Nod. Make “mm-hmm” sounds. Let your face match what you are hearing. Let genuine concern or grief or a twinkle of humor be evident in your tone of voice. People are helped by reality in a relationship, not by playing a role.

4. Listen for and process the emotions that are coming up in the moment. This is something to do at any point in the session, depending on what you see in the person. Initiate a conversation about any emotions that you observe. For instance, many people are nervous in a first counseling session. If you notice this, then ask about it. “You seem like you might be a little nervous right now. How are you feeling?” If the person is indeed nervous or feeling awkward then you have the opportunity to talk through and normalize those feelings. “I know it is kind of strange to come in and start to talk about hard things with someone you

just met. That’s a really normal feeling to have. Is there anything that I can do to help make you feel more at ease?” This offer may well result in talking about “lighter” matters, which is helpful for you as you begin to think about how to walk alongside this person. People are ready to delve into issues and do the work of counseling at different paces. Part of your job is to stay in step with the person so you do not overwhelm by going too quickly, or frustrate by going too slowly. Tuning in to what this person is experiencing and feeling in the moment helps you to stay in step.

5. Listen for the person’s interpretations and for the implications of those interpretations. You are listening for how the person interprets circumstances, God, and him or herself. Often interpretations that are false, misguided or un-biblical contribute to the experience of the presenting problem. Therefore, counseling will frequently involve the work of helping the person think and interpret biblically. This first meeting is your first opportunity to begin to make sense of the person’s world and how he or she conceptualizes what is happening, what it means, and how it impacts life and choices.

For example, perhaps the woman you are talking to seems nervous and you have verbalized this to her. Because you have raised it, she goes on to explain her nervousness: “It is so scary for me to come and talk about my anxiety. When I am anxious I feel like I am letting God down because I am not having the faith and hope that he says I should have.” So, simply put, one of her interpretations is that her anxious feelings mean she is failing as a Christian. There are likely other interpretations, but this insight alone could be an early turning point.

Listen, too, for the implications of what is being said. Imagine if this same woman went on to say, “Because I feel like I am letting God down, I am ashamed to tell others about this struggle. If I do, then they will see how weak a Christian I really am.” So one implication of her interpretation is that she doesn’t speak openly about her anxiety to others for fear of being exposed as the weak Christian she sees herself to be. This, too, is something to discuss.

As you hear more about the contours of the struggle, listen for both interpretations and implications because they offer you potential entryways for addressing the struggle with biblical comfort and relief.

6. Explore potentially serious matters. Some people may be in a crisis situation when they arrive at a first session. You need to be prepared to respond appropriately to what is happening. Perhaps you are already aware that someone is in crisis because of the information shared in the intake process, or when you first made arrangements to meet. Or something may have come out in the course of

the first session that gives you good reason to ask some searching questions to get a sense of what is going on.

For example, if you have learned that someone has a history of depression, then ask, “Have you ever struggled with suicidal thoughts?” If suicide or self-harm is a current struggle or has been in the past, do get a history of past struggles and attempts at self-harm. Assess how this person is doing today, and take immediate action if necessary.<sup>4</sup> Talking plainly about suicide sets a tone that the counseling time is a time to speak openly and frankly about what is going on. If self-destructive behavior is an issue, then you will need to follow up regularly. Talking about it early on sets a precedent for future conversations.

Similarly, you need to be prepared to ask further questions about abuse if you suspect or know already that something has happened. Sexual violation? Physical violence? Verbal aggression? Is your counselee in danger? Get enough details to know what happened, when it happened, and with whom. This kind of knowledge is crucial for you to have, and, here again, you may need to take immediate action. At the very least, it helps you conceptualize how to best care for the person and to also identify starting points for deeper conversations.

**Find out if the person has received any previous counseling for the presenting problem.** After getting a good sense of the reasons the person is pursuing counseling, it is helpful to know if he or she has had any counseling in the past for this issue. If yes, ask what was helpful or unhelpful about those times. This can help you to create a more effective counseling plan.

This inquiry dovetails into the larger matter of what “voices” are in the person’s life. Who—for good or for ill—is speaking or has spoken into the person’s situation? Is there a pastor or church involved already? Is a spouse supportive and willing to be involved in the counseling process in any way? What books, films, websites, and friends play a significant role?

**Specifically identify the person’s goals for counseling and collaboratively work toward laying out biblical goals.** Next, the conversation can transition to the goals for counseling.<sup>5</sup> One or more goals may have already naturally emerged as the person told the story of reasons for pursuing counseling. So you can use any of that information to transition to a time to name goals. “So it sounds like you’d like to grow in your understanding of what biblical forgiveness looks like and how it plays out in your relationships where you see that you have become

<sup>4</sup> For more on suicide assessment, see Michael R. Emler and Aaron Sironi’s article, “Evaluating a Person with Suicidal Desires,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26:2 (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Establishing goals helps make the change process more intentional. “Where are we headed? What’s next?” Setting clear goals can be a significant help whether the counseling is formal or informal.

bitter. Are there any other goals you have in mind for our times together?”

Identifying goals is often an exercise in collaboration. Those who come for counsel might feel stuck and unable to identify solutions. They might need help framing the goals biblically because they are not even sure what they should be aiming for. Additionally, you can bring the skill of summarizing to help concisely capture what you hear about what growth is desired. A person may need time to think through this more deeply, so setting goals is not confined to the first session. Be sure to follow up in the next session if goals are unclear after this initial conversation.

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counselor will be working on together. This conversation can also shed light on what role the counselee wants the counselor to play in order to accomplish the counseling goals. I always write goals down, too, because they will need to be revisited periodically in the future. We will need to assess together where the counselee is in the counseling process, how we are doing in our times in relation to accomplishing these goals, or if we have gotten off-track and need a course correction.

**Make a plan for where to start the next time you get together.** After finishing a conversation about goals, I ask for the counselee to prioritize the list of goals. Once I learn what the counselee sees as most important to explore first, then I ask a question along the lines of, “Well how about we start there next time?” If the counselee agrees, then we have a short-term plan. It can feel hopeful for the counselee to know where the next session is heading. We’re already making progress. Further, having a plan that has been agreed upon by both of us increases the chance of the person coming back.

**Offer encouragement.** Tell this person that *you* are encouraged by the step of faith that has been taken by coming for counseling. As I mentioned earlier, it is no small feat for someone to come and ask for help. As biblical counselors, we want to have the eyes to see that this decision has taken courage and faith. When we recognize that, we then of course want to speak those good words so that the person can be encouraged, too. It takes the Spirit of God to be able to

come humbly for help, and we don't want to miss the opportunity to point out the Spirit's activity in this person's life.

Remember the woman I mentioned earlier who struggles with anxiety? With her, I would specifically share that I am encouraged that she spoke with me about her problem, because it is hard for her to let people know she is anxious. By telling me about it, she is already moving in the right direction. This may seem small, but it is a significant step of faith. I want to point it out as a step of *faith*, so that she can be encouraged to see that God is already at work, and that his work in her is recognizable to me.

If I have heard enough about her specific struggle and am sure I understand it, I might also offer a Scripture verse or passage to encourage her. I might turn to Psalm 103:13–14 and briefly speak about God's heart of compassion toward us. Knowing that we are just "dust," he does not show contempt for us when he sees us overwhelmed by life in a wearying world with real threats. Of course we will get anxious. He understands that. He knows it's hard. He has compassion on us. Reading about God in this light can start to reshape how she believes God thinks about her in her struggle. Not only that, but *my* attitude toward what she feels is "shameful and weak" must mirror God's attitude.

***Invite the person to ask any final questions.*** I like to check in once more before we conclude. I am interested in answering any questions the counseling experience has raised. I find people often do have a question. For example, people often want to know how long a season of counseling tends to last. If so, I use it as an opportunity to come up with a plan for a future schedule—e.g., "How about we meet weekly for four weeks and then reevaluate after that? Depending on our progress, we can continue to meet weekly or perhaps switch to bi-weekly meetings at that point."

***Finally, ask if you can close the time in prayer.*** I pray in a personal way, mentioning the reasons the person has come to counseling and connecting that need to something about the Lord's care. I also commit our future counseling sessions to the Lord and ask him to bless and work through them.

As you can see, this hypothetical example of a first session covers a lot of ground. You may not be able to get through all these matters in the first session. If the counselee is very upset, you might barely get through *any* of it! That's ok. This is a person—not a project. Your aim is to begin to know this person truly, not get through a first session to-do list. Nothing is as important as seeking to know, love and respond appropriately to the person in front of you.

### **Be Intentional**

As you read this toolbox article, perhaps you have been evaluating your own first session practices and methods. Here are a few questions to help you process what we have covered.

- What do you make sure to cover in a first session?
- Have you identified any strengths and weaknesses in your approach?
- Are you considering any adjustments for your ministry setting?

Though there is no formula or one right way to do it, you want to be intentional with what you are doing. You will be more likely to accomplish good with and for another person if you know what you're aiming for and have reasons for doing what you choose to do.

After all, why do we aim to grow in counseling skill? It is so we will honor Christ and honor those whom we minister to. It is so we can love. Indeed, every element that has been described here is simply a different aspect of love. Our goal is to welcome the troubled, provide safety, cultivate trust, and give hope—that is what a good first session looks like.