

Christian Counseling

By Matthew McDonald, LCPC, LMFT

Many people advertise themselves as Christian counselors or offer Christian counseling as part of their specialties, and many clergy members or ministers will recommend to their members that they seek out Christian counseling. However, there are many differing ideas as to what Christian counseling actually looks like. To get a better understanding of what a potential client needs, it is important to talk to a counselor who offers a similar-sounding therapeutic approach to what a client is actually seeking. Unofficially, there are three general approaches to Christian counseling. Even within these three approaches there can be a great deal of difference depending on the training and background of each therapist. These three categories are:

1. A counselor who also identifies himself as a Christian, but provides standard psychological interventions without integrating his understanding of the Christian faith into these interventions. In this case, the client would be seeking the comfort of knowing that his counselor shared a common faith, but not seeking for an element of that faith to be influenced or regularly discussed as a part of treatment. (Most counselors, whether they identify as Christian or not, should be accepting of a client's spiritual beliefs and respect the influence that it has on the client's life, but some clients feel more comfortable in this relationship if the counselor shares the same religion.)
2. A counselor who not only identifies himself as a Christian, but allows core principles of this religion to influence and inform standard psychological interventions. This counselor intentionally integrates core Christian values with understanding of research-based human psychology. This counselor does not integrate these beliefs into the counseling interventions or discussions with the client unless the client shares or requests this religious/spiritual element be a part of treatment.
3. A counselor who claims to provide "Nouthetic" or "biblical" counseling approaches treatment from an understanding or belief that pain, turmoil, and suffering in a person's life are a result of the presence of sin. The interventions provided by this counselor would be grounded predominantly in an understanding or conviction that the Bible is a sufficient guide for counseling most, or even all issues. Counselors providing this treatment attempt to confront what they see as sin in the life of the client. They would provide this intervention believing that it is done out of care for the client and that biblical mandates for living, if followed, would correct the symptoms in the life of the client.

Different types of treatment can be delivered under the label "Christian counseling". It is important to first understand what the client is looking for, and secondly, to inquire about the approach taken by a particular counselor.