



# **GETTING THE MOST OUT OF PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY**

## **FIELD GUIDE**

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# **SPIRITUAL FIRST AID™**

Spiritual First Aid  
Wheaton, Illinois  
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# INTRODUCTION

## **Seeking help through counseling can feel like a big step.**

For many, it takes courage to admit they need support and even more to sit down with a therapist for the first time. It's common to feel nervous, uncertain, or even skeptical in those early moments. Yet choosing to pursue counseling is a sign of strength. It shows that you are taking your well-being seriously and are open to growth.

This guide provides practical steps to help you maximize the benefits of counseling. Whether you are entering therapy for the first time or returning after a break, the tools and insights here are designed to support you throughout the process.

By approaching counseling with intentionality and openness, you give yourself the best chance to experience meaningful and lasting change.





## GETTING STARTED

Beginning the counseling process can feel intimidating, especially if you've never seen a therapist before or are returning after a long break. You may have questions about where to start, how to find the right therapist, or what the first session will be like.

This section will help you navigate those early steps so you can begin the process with greater clarity and confidence.

### **UNDERSTAND DIFFERENT TYPES OF THERAPISTS**

When you're looking for therapy, the various professional titles —psychologist, social worker, counselor, marriage and family therapist, and psychiatrist —can be confusing.

The important thing to know is that all of these licensed professionals can provide therapy. The differences usually come down to their training, philosophical approach, and the additional tools they bring.

- Psychologists (Ph.D. or Psy.D.) provide therapy and are specially trained in psychological testing and assessment, such as diagnosing ADHD or learning disorders.



In most states, psychologists are not licensed to prescribe, though a few states allow those with additional medical training to prescribe certain psychiatric medications.

- Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSWs) provide therapy with an added emphasis on how family, community, and social systems affect mental health. They are also skilled at connecting clients with community resources.
- Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) offer therapy services to individuals, couples, and groups. Their training often highlights practical coping strategies, though approaches vary greatly.
- Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFTs) also provide therapy for individuals but often focus on relational patterns within couples and families.
- Psychiatrists (MDs or DOs) are medical doctors who can provide therapy but often concentrate on prescribing and managing medications, while also considering physical health factors that may affect mental well-being.

These are general tendencies, not rigid categories. The right fit depends less on credentials and more on the therapist's approach and whether you feel comfortable with them. Don't hesitate to ask how they work and whether it aligns with your needs.



## **INTEGRATING FAITH IN THE COUNSELING PROCESS**

For Christians, faith often shapes how we make sense of life and where we turn for hope. When I used to see clients (*Jamie Aten*), I found that inviting faith into the counseling process often opened a deeper space for honesty and healing.

In our experience, if faith is important to you, let your therapist know.

Some readers may prefer to work with a Christian therapist—someone trained in both mental health and theology—because it can feel reassuring to share beliefs openly, pray together, or draw from Scripture during sessions.

Others may prefer to work with a non-Christian therapist who still respects their values and creates space for faith as part of their counseling process. Both paths can be deeply meaningful.

Some also find it helpful to pair therapy with meetings with a pastor or spiritual director. In some cases, individuals choose to sign a release of information so that their therapist and pastor or spiritual director can communicate and coordinate care when appropriate.

What matters most is that you feel safe to bring your whole self into the room. Faith should not be left at the door. Instead, it should be viewed as a vital source of strength and perspective as you walk through the counseling process.



## **FINDING A THERAPIST**

Beginning therapy often feels like the hardest part. Many people are unsure where to start or how to begin looking for a therapist.

A good first step is to consider what you hope to gain from counseling—such as coping with anxiety, working through grief, improving relationships, or simply having a safe place to talk. Clarifying your goals will help guide your search.

There are several practical ways to find a therapist. If you're part of a faith community, you may want to ask your pastor or church network for recommendations, especially if you'd like to work with someone who shares your spiritual beliefs.

You can also ask your doctor for a referral, search your insurance provider's directory, use online databases, or search mental health association listings.

Don't hesitate to reach out to multiple providers before making a decision.

## **THE FIRST SESSION**

Once you've chosen a therapist and scheduled your first appointment, it helps to know what to expect. The first session is usually an assessment, where your therapist will ask questions about your history, current concerns, and goals for therapy.



This is also your opportunity to ask questions about their approach, experience, and what working together might look like. For example, sessions may include a mix of talking through challenges, learning coping strategies, and practicing new ways of thinking or relating.

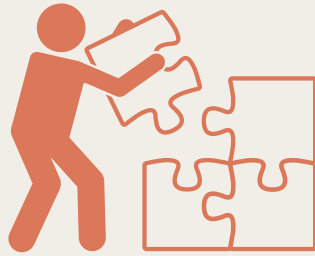
Most therapists expect and invite questions, and many will offer a brief phone consultation to help you decide if they're a good fit.

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## MAXIMIZE THE BENEFITS OF COUNSELING

Therapy is not a passive experience where change “happens to you.” It is most effective when you actively participate in the process.

The more you engage by being honest, asking questions, practicing new skills, and reflecting on your progress, the more you are likely to benefit.

The following insights and practices will help you stay engaged, build a strong therapeutic relationship, and get the most out of your counseling experience.

### **FIND THE RIGHT FIT AND BUILD THE ALLIANCE**

One of the most important factors in therapy isn’t the specific technique or approach; it’s the relationship between you and your therapist.

Research consistently shows that this “therapeutic alliance”—built on trust, collaboration, and feeling genuinely understood—is one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes.



A good therapeutic alliance feels like a partnership. Your therapist brings professional training and perspective, but you bring the knowledge of your own story, struggles, and goals.

Both kinds of expertise matter. When you share openly and your therapist listens attentively, you can work together to set goals, track progress, and make adjustments as needed. This sense of shared purpose often makes therapy more effective than any specific strategies being used.

Sometimes, though, you may sense the connection isn't there. Perhaps you don't feel heard, or their approach doesn't align with what you need. If that happens, bring it up honestly. Many therapists welcome this feedback and will adjust their approach.

If the fit still doesn't improve, this is not a sign of failure; it's a sign you may need to look for a better fit. Switching therapists is often part of the process of finding the right support.

The best therapy happens when the alliance is strong, and you feel safe, supported, and truly seen

## **COME PREPARED**

Preparation is a small step that can make therapy feel more focused and worthwhile. Thankfully, it doesn't have to be complicated. Before each session, take a few minutes to jot down what's been on your mind—one or two moments



since your last session when you struggled, any issues you want to bring up, or times when you noticed progress. If you're taking medication, note any changes in how you're feeling.

Coming prepared not only keeps sessions focused and shows your therapist that you're engaged in the process, but it also provides your therapist with valuable insights and helps you notice growth over time.

Looking back on your notes can reveal how far you've come, especially during times when change feels slow.

## **BE OPEN AND HONEST**

Therapy works best when you're honest about your struggles, even if it feels uncomfortable at first. Many people worry about being judged, but a good therapist is trained to listen with care, not criticism.

You don't have to share everything right away, but being willing to open up over time gives your therapist the information they need to help.

Being open also doesn't mean you need the perfect words. Sometimes just naming an emotion—sad, angry, or lonely—can be enough to get started. If you find yourself holding back, you can even say that out loud. Therapists expect that trust takes time, and simply admitting you're not yet sure what to share can strengthen the relationship.



Openness also helps your therapist notice patterns across sessions that may be hard to see in the moment. By being honest about your emotions, you allow them to accompany you more fully and tailor their support in ways that fit your unique journey.

## **ASK QUESTIONS**

Therapy is a two-way conversation. If you don't understand something your therapist says, ask about it. If you're curious about why they use a certain approach, ask about that too.

Asking questions helps build a collaborative therapeutic alliance by giving you a greater sense of control and helping you understand how therapy works.

For example, you might ask, "What kind of therapy do you use?" or "How do you usually work with people who are struggling with anxiety?" Questions like these can help you decide whether a therapist's approach feels like a good fit.

By asking questions regularly, you give yourself permission to learn as you go. Therapy isn't about passively receiving help; it's about being actively involved.

Good therapists welcome curiosity. Asking good questions shows your therapist that you're invested in your care and truly engaged in the process.



## **SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS**

Therapy is not a quick fix. Progress often unfolds gradually, with ups and downs along the way. Because meaningful change takes both practice and patience, it's normal to feel discouraged at times.

Some issues may improve within weeks, while others may take months or longer. Therapists often describe the path of healing as a “zigzag”—not perfectly linear and sometimes two steps forward, one step back—where setbacks are viewed as part of the growth process rather than proof of failure.

It can also help to check in with your therapist about your expectations. Ask how long people with challenges like your typically stay in therapy, or what early signs of progress you might notice first.

These conversations reduce frustration and keep you grounded in the process. By viewing therapy as a journey that unfolds over time, you give yourself permission to grow at a steady, sustainable pace.

## **PRACTICE BETWEEN SESSIONS**

What happens outside the counseling room is just as important as what happens inside. The time you spend in therapy each week is only a small portion of your life, and real progress often comes when you begin applying what you've learned in everyday situations.



Following through between sessions helps create momentum that accelerates change. Even small steps—like pausing to notice your emotions, practicing a coping strategy once a day, or reflecting on your progress at the end of the week—can reinforce what you’re learning. It also gives your therapist valuable feedback on what’s working, what’s challenging, and where adjustments might be needed.

Making space to practice outside of sessions strengthens the skills you’re building and increases the likelihood you’ll use them effectively when challenges arise.

Try to incorporate the tools, skills, and insights you discuss in therapy into your daily routines. Consistency matters. Over time, these efforts support lasting change and help you get the most out of your counseling experience.

## **MANAGE CONCERNS AND CONFLICTS**

Sometimes you may feel frustrated with your therapist or uncertain if the approach is working. Don’t ignore these feelings. Share them directly. Naming the concern often opens space for growth and can strengthen the therapeutic relationship.

Conflict doesn’t always mean therapy is failing; it can be part of the work itself. Talking openly about miscommunications or uncomfortable moments can model healthier relationships and give you the chance to practice new skills. Addressing concerns early gives the relationship a better chance to succeed.



The key is to see conflict as something to work through rather than avoid. When handled well, it can make therapy more effective and give you the confidence to face challenges directly.

## **CELEBRATE SMALL WINS**

Progress in therapy often comes through small, steady steps built through consistency. Notice and celebrate these moments as they build momentum and remind you that change is possible. Recognizing small steps along the way affirms that your efforts are making a difference, even when the bigger goals still feel far away.

Therapists often encourage keeping a journal or “victory list” to capture these moments, so you can look back on them when you’re feeling discouraged. Sharing small wins with someone you trust—such as a friend, family member, or even your therapist—can also make progress feel more tangible and meaningful.

Celebrating progress doesn’t mean ignoring ongoing struggles; it helps you see growth more clearly, which in turn can increase motivation and hope. When you name and celebrate progress, no matter how small, you reinforce the truth that change is happening and give yourself encouragement to keep going.

Over time, these small acknowledgments accumulate and can transform how you see growth itself.





## NAVIGATING COMMON BARRIERS TO COUNSELING

Even with motivation and good intentions, practical barriers can still make counseling difficult to access. Financial concerns, limited provider availability, or long waitlists can make it difficult to begin or continue therapy.

The good news is that there are creative and affordable ways to access support. This section explores practical steps for addressing these barriers and finding care, even when local resources are limited.

### **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND AFFORDABILITY**

For many people, cost is one of the biggest hurdles to getting counseling. If you have insurance, check what mental health services are covered, including the number of sessions and which providers are in-network. If you don't have insurance, or if the copays feel overwhelming, it's still worth exploring other options.

Some therapists offer sliding scale fees based on your income, and many community counseling centers, churches,



or nonprofits provide reduced-cost or even free sessions. Universities with psychology or counseling programs often have training clinics where graduate students, supervised by licensed professionals, provide therapy at a lower rate.

If you're concerned about affordability, ask providers directly about fees, payment plans, or lower-cost resources in your area. It's also worth exploring support groups, hotlines, and community-based programs that can offer meaningful help at no cost.

Don't let finances stop you from seeking support. The key is knowing there are many pathways to care. Even if traditional weekly therapy feels out of reach, help and healing are still possible.

### **EXPLORE OPTIONS WHEN ACCESS IS LIMITED**

In some areas, particularly rural communities, finding a therapist can be challenging. You may discover that there are few providers nearby or encounter long waitlists. While this can feel discouraging, it doesn't mean you're out of options.

Telehealth has expanded access significantly. Many therapists now offer sessions by video or phone, reducing travel time and widening availability.

Online platforms also connect you with licensed professionals across your state, making it easier to find someone who fits your needs.



If therapists in your area are fully booked, ask about cancellation lists, short-term group therapy, or workshops while you wait.

You can also explore support groups or peer support programs as an interim. These may not fully replace ongoing therapy, but they can still provide steady care and help you take meaningful steps forward until you're able to connect with a provider.

Some churches and organizations also offer evidence-informed programs such as Spiritual First Aid (SFA). In fact, many have created entire SFA ministries to provide structured peer support and practical care.

While not a substitute for clinical treatment, these ministries can serve as a meaningful bridge helping you find community, reduce isolation, and receive support until professional services are available.

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# CONCLUSION

Therapy is not about perfection or quick solutions; it is about engaging in a process that unfolds over time. Progress may be slow, uneven, or even frustrating, yet each step forward matters.

By staying committed and realistic about what therapy can offer, you give yourself the opportunity to grow in lasting and meaningful ways.

The good news is that you don't have to carry the weight of your struggles alone. A therapist can provide tools, perspective, and support, but they can also walk beside you with empathy and care.

Along with friends, family, community, and sometimes creative solutions like Telehealth or reduced-cost services, counseling can be one piece of a broader support system that helps you endure and move forward.

Ultimately, counseling is most effective when you bring your whole self to it, including your questions, openness, faith, and willingness to engage in the change process. Healing takes time, but with the right support, hope and transformation are possible.



# SPIRITUAL FIRST AID

## CO-FOUNDERS



**Jamie Aten, Ph.D.**, is the Co-Founder of Spiritual First Aid. He is also the Founder and Co-Director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute, Blanchard Chair of Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership, and Co-Coordinator of the Trauma Certificate Program at Wheaton College. He is both a Hurricane Katrina and a late-stage early-onset cancer survivor. As a trauma psychologist, Jamie has responded to and researched disasters and mass traumas around the globe. He has published nine authored and edited books and over 150 scholarly publications, including some of the the top peer-reviewed journals in psychology. His research has been supported by over \$7 million in awarded grants. He is frequently cited, interviewed, and published in outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *BBC News*, *Psychology Today*, *Religion News Service*, *Moody Radio*, and *Christianity Today*. In 2016, Jamie was awarded the FEMA Community Preparedness Champion Award at the White House. He also received the Early Career Award and Applied Psychology of Religion and Spirituality Award from the American Psychological Association's Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. He is co-author and co-host of the award-winning *The Better Samaritan* (column and podcast) at *Christianity Today*. You can follow Jamie on LinkedIn.



**Kent Annan, M.Div.**, is the Co-Founder of Spiritual First Aid. He is also the Co-Director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute and Director of Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership at Wheaton College. His humanitarian work has included living in England, France, Albania, Kosovo, and Haiti. Kent co-founded the nonprofit Haiti Partners. He previously served on the board of directors of Equitas Group, which focused on child trafficking issues in Haiti and Southeast Asia. Kent writes for publications such as *The Washington Post* and *Christianity Today*. He is the author of four books, including *Slow Kingdom Coming: Practices for Doing Justice, Loving Mercy, and Walking Humbly in the World*. In addition, he is co-author and co-host of the award-winning *The Better Samaritan* (column and podcast) at *Christianity Today*. You can follow Kent on LinkedIn.





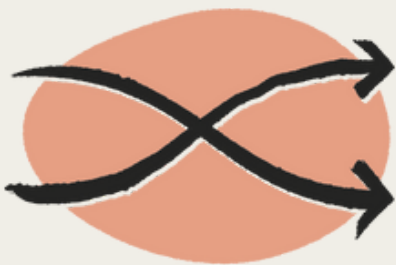
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