



Family Counseling - An Option Worth Considering

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When we face problems in life, it's not unusual to think the burden of those problems is ours and ours alone. However, there are many times when there may be real help in involving those with whom we're the closest - our families.

Family members can be important in helping a person deal with a problem in a variety of ways. Involving them may lead to greater understanding, to more support, or helping find and treat the causes of a problem.

Family counseling is a specialized field first developed in the 1950s. While family counseling employs a number of different approaches to working with families, the approach of most family counselors has some common characteristics:

- They focus on the family as a client instead of just seeing a person or two as the cause of a problem
- They see the way a family operates as the result of numerous influences from both internal and external pressures
- They believe that the family is greater than the sum of the people who make up the family
- They maintain that a family has a tendency to remain as it is unless forced to change
- They see all behavior as a form of communication

How do you know if family counseling is right for your situation? Although there are usually no specific signals that indicate that family counseling is needed, there are some general signs that a family might be well served in getting treatment:

- I would feel better if a family member knew of my dilemma
- My life would be better if a family member treated me differently
- Our family would function better if a family member changed a behavior that he or she is now engaged in

On the other hand, if a problem is of recent origin and appropriate for the age of the person involved, such as a young adult having career or dating concerns, it may be something better dealt with by more experienced or wiser members of the family, rather than family counseling. But when long-term, serious problems, such as addiction or serious depression are present, family counseling could yield positive benefits.

Finding professionals dealing in family counseling is usually not difficult. Specialists who work with families come from a number of disciplines, including counseling, psychology, psychiatry, marriage and family therapy, social work, and pastoral care.

Recommendations from friends and colleagues are always a good starting point, as well as talking with your family clergy. Your local school counselor may be able to make a recommendation, or try your local mental health clinic. Check the yellow pages of your phone directory under "Marriage and Family Therapists."

When you locate a family counselor, make sure the person is a good fit for your family. Make sure the professional is appropriately licensed for your state or city. Then ask questions during your first interview about the counselor's approach, working methods and costs.

Professionals in the family counseling field work in a number of ways, depending on their educational background and the situation you present. Most will ask the entire family come in for sessions, but some will see just the couple in the relationships and a few will even work individually with someone on his or her family. Some clinicians want a history of the family, while others focus on the present. Ask your counselor's approach and methods before beginning the process of treatment.

Like every kind of change process, it is most helpful if you go into family counseling with a goal in mind that you have some control over. Wanting to change someone else is usually not productive. Aiming for ways you can change yourself in regard to family members usually is. Likewise, goals that focus on behaviors are more likely to yield positive results than those focused on changing an emotion.

Family counseling has been found to be as effective as individual counseling. It is especially recommended in regard to the treatment of disorders such as anorexia nervosa and addiction. Families are sometimes reluctant to seek help as a group, but those that do often find it beneficial in breaking down barriers in communication and intimacy, and in finding more productive ways of operating as a family.