

# Counseling: When to Refer

The lines between discipleship and counseling can be blurry.

In some ways, this is a good and important aspect of quality discipleship. In order to mentor one another effectively, we need to be able to get into the deeper things in our lives and in our hearts. What are the motivations behind why we're doing what we're doing? What beliefs are getting in the way of us trusting God in an area of our lives? What aspects of our history could be contributing to some barriers we're experiencing in our spirituality? Without getting into these deeper discussions, our discipleship remains at surface level and the quality of our effectiveness is limited.

However, we recognize that discipleship alone cannot fully address the needs of someone who requires professional counseling during a particular time in their life. Robin plays an important and supportive role, but he'll never be Batman. Many of us have experienced the frustration of trying to make a relationship into something it's not—and it never works.

But how do we know when professional counseling is the need of the hour? How do we know when it's time to refer a friend to a licensed therapist?

The foremost sign it's time to refer is when a person's safety is in question. If a person is having serious thoughts of harming themselves, suicide, or is neglecting their basic human needs, help them get in touch with a professional right away.

But many other cases are less obvious and require a lot of prayer for discernment. Here are questions I've pondered myself when considering if I should encourage a friend towards professional counseling:

Do we seem to be talking about the same sort of internal issues over and over and aren't really making much headway?

Do the problems seem to be much more deeply rooted than maybe it seemed at first? Are they related to strongly ingrained false beliefs or negative experiences from their past?

Do they have a history of trauma that they've never really addressed with a professional? Or have they had experience in the past with counseling but the trauma seems to be resurfacing (this is very normal).

Does my friend seem to need some practical mental health skills that I'm finding myself not very equipped for?

Maybe I am giving them good advice on a weighty issue in their internal life, but they don't seem to be hearing it from me. Perhaps they would take this more seriously from a professional and God is calling me to play more of a role of support?

With all of these things, the length of time that the issue is going on, the severity of the issue, and how much it seems to be inhibiting their lives are all factors to heavily consider when trying to make this call.

One important note I will end with though is this– with the exception of the more obvious cases (self harm, suicidal ideation, trauma resurfacing) we don't and can't know if a person going to therapy is the right call. It could seem like a pretty good idea to us, a helpful tool, but in terms of if it's what God is trying to urge them to do right now, we don't know. We can offer our opinion, reasons why we think it's a good idea, but ultimately we need to make it clear that we trust the person to discern for themselves if that's how the spirit is leading right now. Beginning counseling, especially if it's your first time, can feel very intimidating, and it's always best for a person to go when they are ready, because they believe that God thinks they are ready.

In the meantime, we can support and love them and try to offer the best discipleship we can. A person will be much more ready to make the leap to start counseling when they feel trusted and supported, and know that you respect their discernment in their life to seek God's timing.