

Teen Counseling: What Will Your Teen's Therapist Share with You?

Teens attend individual teen counseling and therapy for a multitude of reasons, including:

- Overcoming feelings of sadness, loneliness, and depression
- Improving self-confidence and self-esteem
- Learning anxiety and stress management techniques
- Coping with grief, loss, or a traumatic event
- Enhancing relationships with friends and family members
- Developing better problem-solving and decision-making skills
- Resolving academic issues
- Recovering from alcohol or substance abuse, eating disorders, and other self-harming behaviors
- Dealing with chronic illness or other health issues
- Working through boundaries and other sexual issues

While parental involvement in a teen's life is vital and you should always take an active and supportive role in your teen's interests and activities, there are limits to how active of a role you'll be able to take in your teen's counseling or therapy.

The Client-Therapist Relationship

Whether a client is eight years old or 80, the relationship created between that individual and his or her therapist is unlike any other.

One of the most important aspects of the therapy relationship – indeed, one of the most important aspects of therapy's effectiveness – is the privacy and confidentiality inherent in this relationship.

Fewer teens and adults would be willing to attend therapy if they knew what they disclosed in counseling sessions would be shared with others after the fact. And even those that did attend therapy under less confidential conditions would be less inclined to share the feelings and concerns necessary for therapy's effectiveness.

Therefore, licensed mental health professionals such as psychologists,

counselors, therapists, and social workers work under ethical guidelines that protect clients' identities and conversations from being shared outside of therapy without a client's written permission – commonly known as “informed consent.”

Limits to Confidentiality and Your Teen's Privacy

There are several limits to client-therapist confidentiality that affect clients of all ages, and there are some gray areas that are specific to adolescent and teen counseling and therapy.

In general, if a client discloses information about the abuse of a child, an elderly person, or someone who is vulnerable due to a disability, the therapist is required by law to report the abuse.

Counselors and therapists are also required to report threats to personal safety, including clients' threats or intentions to harm themselves or others.

Additionally, since teens are considered minors until the age of 18, teen counselors and therapists should always discuss confidentiality issues with teens and parents together prior to the beginning of treatment.

As mentioned, one of the most important determinants in teen counseling and therapy's success is the confidential and trusting relationship created between the teen and his or her therapist. In order for your teenager to trust his or her therapist, he or she must know that the therapist will keep what he or she shares in confidence.

However, given the uniqueness of each teenager and the difficulties they face – not to mention the variance in local, state, and national laws regarding confidentiality and disclosure – there are often differences in the confidentiality arrangements that are mutually agreed upon by a therapist, a teen, and his or her parents.

That having been said, a common compromise regarding parent involvement in teen counseling is for the teenager to provide his or her parents regular updates on the issues being worked on in therapy and whether or not he or she is making progress in exchange for assurances that the teen will be informed by the therapist before the therapist discloses any information.

In general, you shouldn't expect your teen's therapist to share anything other than general information about the issues your teen is working on and whether or not your teenager is making progress. The only exceptions being the disclosures of abuse or threats to personal safety discussed above.

Confidentiality and informed consent issues should be discussed and agreed upon by a teen, his or her parents, and the therapist prior to the beginning of treatment, and your teen and you should feel free to ask any questions about privacy and confidentiality before counseling begins.

The Importance of Your Involvement in Your Teen's Therapy and Life

Every individual, regardless of age, deserves a safe and confidential environment in which they can explore their lives. Professional counselors and therapists strive to provide this space to their clients. And this safe and confidential space is a critical component to the client-therapist relationship and the effectiveness of counseling and therapy.

At the same time, parents must play an active role in their child's life and provide their teen the love and support they need to grow into healthy and mature young adults.

Parents and teen counselors must balance these roles for teens to get the most out of therapy.

This means therapists must occasionally share information about their teen client with the teen's parents that they would never share if their client was an adult. Simultaneously, parents must be willing to give their teen the privacy and space they need and deserve and understand that their teen's therapist won't disclose specifics discussed during therapy without the consent of the teenager.

If the privacy and confidentiality issues worry you, discuss your concerns with your teen's therapist during your first meeting.

A teen counselor's ability to work effectively with parents, listen to their assessments or concerns, provide suggestions, and receive feedback is vital to

the healing process. It's equally important that you feel comfortable with your teen's therapist so you can communicate openly and work together to create an environment that allows your teen to thrive and be the best he or she can possibly be.