



Creating a Counselor Referral List

Judy Cha, PhD
Director, Redeemer Counseling

People may feel more comfortable seeking out counseling when they get a referral from a trusted source, such as churches, seminaries, or friends. A referral can help remove barriers to going to counseling and shorten the time they wait to seek help. Keep in mind that the number one factor in favorable outcomes in counseling is the quality of the relationship between the counselor and the client. When you refer to counseling, you are helping someone build a connection, with the hope that they can feel safe enough with the counselor to reveal their broken parts, explore their past, and identify the ways they have developed to deal with their pain and counter their shame. The counselor needs to embody the compassion, grace, and truth of the Gospel.

Similar to any relationship, it is hard to discern whether a counselor is a good fit until the connection builds. At the same time, we can do our due diligence about who we entrust as a referral.

Here are a few guidelines to consider when building your counselor referral list

1

Know the range of Christian counseling available

Christian counseling varies in how counselors approach faith and clinical practice.

Modern psychology was initially developed (largely atheistically) by doctors and scientists who followed a scientific method. Christian counselors have responded to the findings of modern psychology in different ways. Some choose to embrace the findings of psychology, perhaps receiving their training at an entirely secular institution, and perhaps not explicitly using the Bible or prayer at all unless their clients bring up matters of faith. This, by the way, is a common standard in the field of psychology in a secular setting. They may or may not integrate theology in their practice of counseling, but we should not assume they are any less godly or able to model Christ to their clients.

Others practice counseling in a much more explicitly Christian context, such as a church or Christian institution, and may receive their training at a seminary. They will likely explicitly discuss matters of faith, scripture, and prayer in the counseling process. Those who identify as biblical or pastoral counselors base their counseling process on theology and the Bible. Some may also be informed about psychological concepts and practices.

Then, there are other counselors who focus on integrating the two, psychology and the Gospel, as we do at Redeemer Counseling. As a counselor of 30 years who has been trained in both biblical counseling and secular psychology, I found that both these approaches to counseling are not always incompatible with each other. We have much to learn from both. How much the therapist

integrates theology and psychology will depend on the context of their practice. Churches can fully integrate, while secular mental health organizations have more restrictions on starting discussions on faith in counseling.

2

Refer based on need

For the best counselor fit, have referrals based on level of need. In general, the person may want to see a counselor with more specialized experience if they have one or more of the following:

- **Their struggles have lasted for years.**
- **They are experiencing loss of functioning, trouble caring for themselves, going to school or work, socializing, or taking care of responsibilities.**
- **They have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder.**
- **They are taking medication prescribed by a psychiatrist.** One thing to note: when people are under the care of multiple care providers, such as a doctor and psychiatrist, it is important that all providers are open to collaborating with one another.
- **They lack access to community and social networks.**

3

Learn and provide information on the counselor's background and style

Counselors often have websites to introduce their services that include their qualifications

and experience. If not, they should provide an informed consent which includes the description of treatment that they can provide. As you build your list, you may want to connect with a few counselors and ask some background questions such as:

- **What is your experience?** The greater the need, the more the referral should be to a counselor with more experience.
- **What is your education? Your credentials?** In general, there are counselors with a master's degree in theology or counseling from a seminary or Bible school and counselors with a master's degree and license in a counseling field. Having a license does not indicate whether the counselor is good at what they do, but it does add a layer of accountability to a licensing board that requires them to adhere to the standards of their profession. Most insurance plans require a licensed professional as the provider for reimbursement.
- **What are your specializations?** Often, specializations are connected to any additional training and experience. Asking this question should not be offensive to them.
- **How do you address the issue of faith and God in the therapy context?** This question may help you to gauge how they integrate theology and psychology.
- **How do you work with clients when they have multiple providers, doctors or church communities providing support to clients?**
- **What are your fees per session? How do you handle insurance? Is there a sliding scale, pro bono sessions, or aid for low income clients?**

4

Empower the person seeking help

There is a limit to how much you can know about a counselor before actually engaging in the counseling process. As you refer, encourage the person to look for a counselor who is a right fit. Empower them to ask questions and assess their comfortability with the counselor. Listen to feedback from people who have used counselors on your list and be willing to adapt the list over time.

Here are examples of what the person can consider as they meet with their counselor:

- **Do you feel at ease with your counselor?**
- **Are you able to share more deeply without feeling afraid of their judgment?** It is important that you feel safe to reveal more about yourself. If you are feeling increasingly uncomfortable, let your counselor know. The process of exploring your discomfort may lead to resolving it.
- **Does the counselor ask good questions in ways that help you reflect deeper?** Counselors should have the skill to help you learn more about yourself.
- **As time goes on, are your symptoms improving and are you better able to manage your responsibilities?** You are seeking care to feel better and function better. Though it is very common for you to feel your symptoms are a bit worse at first, overtime, you should experience a gradual shift in how you feel, think and behave.
- **Are you able to talk with your counselor about God in meaningful ways? Do you experience Christ-likeness in your counselor?**

As Christians, we know that the ultimate source of healing and change is God.

We desire people to draw closer to him as they bring their hurts, experience his comfort and grace, and internalize the Gospel. However, depending on where a person is on their journey, we have to prioritize the care that we suggest. For example, if they are experiencing panic attacks, meditating on his word or prayer to deepen connection with God may not help immediately. They may need to understand the biology of panic attacks, learn somatic interventions from a therapist, or take medication to alleviate the panic attack and stabilize the symptoms, as well as meditate and pray. Having this list of counselors on hand as a resource for you, small group leaders, and mercy ministers, will help you build a strong community, ease the load carried by your whole team, and expand the care network for people who need help.
