

Seeking Counseling: A Sign of Strength or Weakness?

Strength is a virtue praised and promoted in our society. Often, strength is thought to be synonymous with self-sufficiency, independence, and stoicism. Conversely, asking for help can be seen as a sign of weakness. Statements such as “Pull yourself up by the bootstraps,” “Never let them see you sweat,” and “Keep a stiff upper lip,” and pejorative labels of whiner, crybaby, and victim encourage people to keep their problems to themselves and deal with them as best they can. However, the issue really isn’t whether or not we have problems—we all do—but whether we have the courage to face issues and resolve them.

Most of us realize that making even the smallest of personal changes requires an amazing effort and often involves setbacks. Take any example from your own background (e.g., stop smoking, acquire an education, lose weight, become more confident, change vocations). Before making a decision to try changing, most of us are apprehensive. We’re not sure we can pull it off and we’re a bit afraid of what will happen if we do, as well as if we don’t. “What if I fail? Will the changes really make me happy?” A great many people don’t let anyone know they are contemplating a change. That way no one will know if it doesn’t work out. Fear is the emotion that stops most change from occurring. Only a minority will summon up their courage and commit themselves to change despite their fear.

Besides commitment, change also involves strategy. Desire and willpower are generally not enough. If you wanted to build a car engine, sail around the world, or start a business, would you attempt it without training, information, and a game plan? Would aspiration and good intentions be enough to determine success? Some people, who would willingly seek expert advice in other spheres, feel they “should” intuitively know how to run their personal life. Seeking help seems like an admission of ignorance, an acknowledgement of failure. However, while people *are* the “experts” on their own lives, counselors are change experts. Coming to them to learn skills and strategies for change doesn’t indicate ignorance, but a thirst for knowledge and a propensity for growth. As the saying indicates, “There are no ignorant questions, only ignorant people.”

What happens to the people who don’t overcome their fear and pride as they face the need to make changes? In most cases, probably nothing. That may be the most devastating outcome. Some may blame the situation or the people around them for not being different or simply pretend there is no problem to address. They may try to hide their problems by self-medicating with drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, workaholism, or other addictions. In counseling lingo, all these avenues for avoiding change are called

“resistance,” but regardless of the term, it is a fairly universal force that can stop us from growing.

So are the people sitting in the counselor’s office strong or weak? Anyone who works with individuals, couples, and families who willingly choose to confront their demons in order to change can’t help but appreciate their often-extraordinary strength. Seasoned mental health professionals come to share a certain sense of awe and respect for the people with whom they work. They know that the path to change is “the road less traveled,” rough and mountainous, but ultimately rewarding for most of the heroic souls who brave it.

If you would like to embark on your own journey of change and self-exploration, please contact any of Diakon Family Life Services’ offices to learn more about the counseling process or to be connected with a counselor. Visit us on the web at www.diakon.org/fls.