

MCO Counseling 1st Session Process

By Josh Spurlock

In private practice outpatient counseling the first counseling session is a bit of an interview. Clients are trying on a new therapist for fit and the counselor is working to establish rapport that will make the difference between a successful course of treatment, and a single session missed opportunity.

Successful MCO therapists develop a structure that leads new clients to commitment. Not to the therapist per se, but to doing the work necessary to bring about the change they need. The goal is to lead the client to commit to themselves to do the work necessary for them to reach their goals and have the life of THRIVING they were created for. Whether that be with you or someone else. If you successfully lead a new client to an internal commitment to change you highly increase the likelihood, they will engage the work.

For some this will feel a bit unnatural. If you have been used to jumping right into assessment and treatment in the first session taking time to scaffold commitment and clarify fit may be counterintuitive. The difference it makes, however is huge. It's worth learning something new.

There is a reliable process that increases the likelihood of a positive outcome. Nothing is a 100%, but these best practices give you the best opportunity to achieve a positive outcome. That's what this training is about. Building on the experience of more than 8k first sessions, we've put together this structure of best practices to accelerate your journey to consistently achieving commitment with new clients. Practice it until you can do it in your sleep and over time it'll adapt into your own voice. Soon it will be as natural as breathing and you can say goodbye to first session anxiety.

If you navigate this process well your clients will feel cared for, understood, and believe you have the competency to help them reach their goals. They will also feel a personal commitment to themselves to do the necessary work for them to have the life they want.

The MCO 1st Session Process

- 1. Prep**
- 2. Rapport**
- 3. Pre-frame**
- 4. Discovery**
- 5. MCO Client Journey**
- 6. Q&A**
- 7. Scheduling**
- 8. Encouragement**

Prep (5 min)

The prep phase of the process happens before you are in the meeting with a new client. It's the preparation that sets you up for success!

3 Peak Emotions

Emotion is contagious. Through your tone of voice and body language the client's brain picks up on the signals you are sending. If you are **optimistic** about the client reaching their goals, **confident** you can help them, and **hopeful** about their future, that will come through to the client.

Imagination is real to the brain. If you imagine an exciting scenario, your body will feel excitement. If you imagine eating delicious food, your mouth will water. If you imagine something scary, your body will feel anxious. If you imagine something peaceful you will feel at peace.

If you were offered a MILLION dollars to get yourself into a state of feeling compassionate, optimistic, confident, and hopeful in 5 minutes or less, I bet you could figure out what to imagine to get yourself there before the instruments were hooked up to measure your feelings. Figuring out what will get you in the right state of mind prior to your session with a new client is an important step of preparation.

Pre-Session Ritual

Knowing what helps you get into the right frame of mind equips you to construct a pre-session ritual that changes your brain-state into that frame.

For some that's imagining the scene of King Jesus leading this person to the session they are about to have and empowering them to be exactly what the person needs at this phase in their journey. Or perhaps prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to equip you. Maybe it's taking some deep breaths and a moment of mindful meditation, or 10 jumping jacks or air squats to get the blood pumping!

There isn't one right pre-session ritual. What's important is that you know yourself well enough to know what works for you and that you take the time to set the call up for success.

Review New Clients Notes

Review the client's intake paperwork so they are fresh on your mind going into the session.

Initial Rapport (2 min)

The first 30-90 seconds of your session is all about establishing a basic rapport with the client. It's about creating a connection that says, *"Hi, Welcome! I'm friendly and I'm here to help."*

Tips: Use the clients name frequently, without being weird. Match the client's vocal patterns of volume, pace, pitch, and vocabulary. Use paraverbals "Uh uhh, Ya, Okay, Ummmm, Ohhh". Match the client as much as possible, the brain interprets signals of similarity as signals of safety and you want the client to feel safe with you. Be authentic and join with them where they are at.

"Hi, you must be Mary? Hi Mary, I'm Josh, were you able to get connected smoothly? I'm glad you made it @"

Pre-Frame (2 min)

The pre-frame helps the client feel secure by providing a structure for the time and makes clear what they can expect. It's one of the most important parts of the process.

"Our session today is going to be a little different than the ones that follow. In our time today I'm going to talk through some informed consent matters, tell you a little bit about myself, and ask some questions that will help me better understand the help you are here for. My goal is to help lead us to a decision about whether or not we are a good fit for working together. At the end of our time, I'm going to make a recommendation about our work together, and if it feels right to both of us, we can schedule our next appointment. Does that sound good? Great @"

Verbal Informed Consent (6 minutes)

Informed consent is an important ethical concept in our work that says clients have the right to know about certain matters pertaining to their work before they agree to do the work. These matters are covered thoroughly in our written informed consent documents, but some of them are covered again verbally at the beginning of the relationship. We call this reiteration verbal informed consent.

"As we get started there are a couple of matters of informed consent that are important for us to go over. The first, as you probably already know, is that as a counselor at MyCounselor.Online I provide faith-based counseling, specifically Christian counseling. I don't impose my values on my clients; however, my values do influence the way I work. It is also important that you know that faith-based counseling, under the first amendment, is not regulated by state or federal government. Even though I am providing faith-based counseling I hold myself to the same high standards of professionalism you might find at a secular practice. I also want you to know that I am educated with a masters in__and as a faith-based counselor I am not state licensed/ I am pursuing state licensure/ I am licensed as a _____ in the state of _____"

I also need to say a word about confidentiality. Everything we will talk about will stay confidential between us, with a few exceptions in which I am required to make disclosures to authorities. Specifically, if you tell me, you may be a danger to yourself or others, or that you know about a minor or elderly person being harmed. Lastly, if a judge gets involved in your life I will be required to abide by any order they issue. Do you have any questions about any of these matters or any other questions from our informed consent documents I can answer for you?"

Discovery (30 min)

In the discovery phase you are engaging the new client with genuine curiosity to understand their needs and determine if working together is a good fit. While assessment is always happening, the primary aim of the questions in the first session is to clarify the needs that brought the client to this session and lead them towards a commitment. A commitment to themselves to do the work necessary for them to reach their goals and have the life of THRIVING they were created for. Whether they do that work with someone else or they work with you.

- 1. "Now that we've covered the informed consent, what has brought you to the point of wanting to do this work now?"*
- 2. "What do you hope to be different about your life in the future from doing this work?"*
- 3. "That feels important to you. What about that future is most important to you?"*
- 4. "What are the stakes? What do you stand to lose if change doesn't happen?"*
- 5. "I'm asking this next question because in my experience change is hard and it takes courage, commitment, and determination to achieve. After sharing your goals today just check in with yourself. Are you feeling ready to engage this work to achieve the change you desire?"*

Recommended Client Journey (5 min)

At this point you have led the client through a series of questions to clarify their current reality, their desired future reality, the cost of not enacting change, and verbalizing their commitment level. If at this point you believe you can align with the client's goals and help them reach them, you present a recommended path forward.

- "I believe I can help you experience the change you want. And, I think it's important you do this work to have the future you want, whether you work with someone else, or work with me. It's important."*
- "Like I said before, change requires courage, commitment, and determination. You've already shown your courage just in getting to the point of this conversation. Whether it's with someone else or with me, you are beginning an important journey."*
- "If it feels right to you, and you want to do this work with me, I recommend we start with
{1x 50-minute session a week | 1x 100-minute session a week / 2x 50-minute sessions a week for 8 | 12 | 16 weeks} and we reassess at that point. That is going to give us the*

best traction towards your goals in the shortest amount of time. We could also take it a bit slower and meet = Whatever feels right to you."

Q&A + Objection Handling

Commitment

Having answered all the client's questions, it's time to ask for commitment.

There is no pressure. Your experience advocate will be reaching out in 24 to 48 hours to touch base with you and help you with any next steps needed. I've really enjoyed meeting you and am thankful you shared your story with me. I'd love to work with you and get you started. Would you like me to schedule our next appointment?

Encouragement

- Reiterate your respect for their courage.
- Reiterate your confidence that you will be able to help them reach their goals.
- Offer to pray for them before ending.